

III

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マグダラで眠れ

MAY YOUR SOUL REST IN

MAGDALA.



マグダラで“眠れ”Ⅲ 支倉凍砂 ◆ イラスト／鍋島テツヒロ



ようやく製錬の基礎を学び始めて

いるフェネシスからすれば、イリーネ
のやろうとしていることは三つも三つ

も先のことになる。

イリーネが、フェネシスからかけて
もらった言葉を持ち出しても、フェネ
シスの反応は変わらなかつた。

ウル・ フェネシス

クースラの手で騎士団
の聖歌隊から連れ出さ
れた修道女。獸の耳を行
している。



イリーネ・ ブルナー

ケルベツティ鍛冶屋組合
長代理の少女クースラ
たちと一緒に町を出る決
意をした。

「こんな好き勝手ができるなら、
幸運は思ったよりもあるみたいね」





クースラ

「利子」という意味の名
を持つ青年。別名「眠ら
ない錬金術師」。

「こんな無防備でよく生きてこれたな」

クースラは、フェネシスに向けたもの
なのか自分に向けたものなのか曖昧
な、呆れるようなため息をつき、フェネ
シスの後ろに回ると肩を引いて体を起
こす。それから、肩の後ろと膝の下に手
を入れて、脱力しきつくてくたつている
体を一息に持ち上げた。

ウェランド

クースラの昔馴染みの鍊金術師。鍊金術師ではないとい
う疑いを掛けられてしまう。

「ウエランドは一言も俺たちに
助けてくれとは言わなかつただろう」

「鍊金術師であることを
証明したらどうだ。町を出られるぞ」

エル・オトリス
クラジウス騎士団から前任
のポーラーの代わりに派遣さ
れた騎重隊の隊長。

「すいぶん冷たいのね。
仲間じゃないの？」

「なんで、あなたはそんなに
冷静なんですか？」





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Prologue

She was sleeping. Though she was usually dressed in white, she was draped in grey.

She had been tending to the fire and doing all kinds of physical work during the long, long smelting work, and once she was done, cleaned up the soot riddled furnace. At this moment, she was completely worn out, holding onto a grey rod that was used for scraping, and sat by the window with the vestiges of sunset still there.

She had neither the knowledge nor the physical strength, but she had the passion.

There was a book placed on the table, and despite how busy she was, she took the time to read it. In the meantime, she ran off to check the mineral ores that were neatly arranged; such dedication was certainly not due to curiosity alone.

What is that thing? What is this? She kept questioning, chirping away like a bird in the morning.

However, Kusla could not help but grin upon seeing her hands and face covered in soot, lying by the window wearily.

Was the day he was going to call her an 'ally' about to come?

In any case, it was her dream, and by the definition of an Alchemist, it should be called Magdala.

Act 1

“I do not wish to assist in such mischief.”

Till this point, Fenesis had been stirring mass in the pot obediently, only to suddenly stop and turn to look at Fusla.

“Assist in mischief?”

Kusla was seated on a chair, reading a book, his feet resting on the work desk, and he turned to look at Fenesis.

A few days later, they would be leaving this workshop for a new town. They were preparing for it.

“I don’t intend to do anything bad.”

“No, that is something bad.”

Fenesis noted adamantly, and continued on,

“In any case, I certainly feel that you are committing fraud.”

The greed eyes were staring at Kusla. If one could say that those emerald-like pupils were a rarity, the white hair that was tied up to avoid affecting her work would be of similar rarity. However, it was rare that a girl like Fenesis, aged between ‘young’ and ‘infant’, working in the workshop.

The emerald eyes and white hair might pale in rarity compared to the things at the side of her head however.

She had a humanoid body, and also an abnormality of a beast. She had cat-like ears, and because of that, was deemed a cursed blood. Fenesis was originally born in a distant land far to the Southeast, and the others in her tribe were all slaughter.

"Fraud...well, I wonder if it can be considered fraud to begin with, no?"

"Do not try to misdirect me. You want to make this copper block look like gold, is it not?"

Fenesis gave a serious look, going straight to the point.

Kusla put down his feet that were resting on the work desk, sighed, and answered,

"I admit that this is a fact. Your accusations are mostly correct."

"Then—"

"Listen to me. And stir that pot!"

In response to Kusla's words, Fenesis raised her eyebrows.

"I am not going to listen. I misunderstood you. You like to lie and be violent to others, but there were all valid reasons for that."

She was referring to Kusla kicking the young widow Irine for the sake of obtaining that Damascus Steel.

However, Kusla did explain that his actions were for Irine's sake, and Fenesis did accept it somewhat. Kusla did not intend to cultivate an image of an outlaw who would willingly take all the blame, but he decided to use this opportunity to make use of it, for it would give such an impression when viewed from the side. There would be some impressive power displayed if one was to mix some truths in the lies, and his actions were a prime example.

But even so, Fenesis had the tendency of radically beautifying Kusla's actions.

My name is 'Interest', Kusla thought.

The restless alchemist, crowned Kusla for working all day and night without resting. That meant that like interest, he would continue to work through late nights for the sake of reaching the destination for an Alchemist—the land of Magdala. He helped Fenesis for the sake of his own Magdala, and kept her in the workshop.

Of course, Kusla did explain this in irritation a few times, but Fenesis still assumed he was a good person.

The reason why she was furious this time would be because Kusla betrayed her trust, rather than anything immoral he did. She looked as though she was completely betrayed, saying,

“I-I never thought you would take the path of a thief.”

She looked like a nun pious to God’s teachings, saying ‘there are no true sinners on this world’.

Fenesis’ show of expression stunned Kusla, but at this point, he was not surprised by it.

He was however taken aback that Fenesis would be so direct in her words. A few days back, she was so tentative, so timid when she talked. Kusla could not help but think that something or little significance was able to trigger such a massive change in her.

Set a goal for yourself.

Kusla once said this to Fenesis. The latter, who traveled here from a distant place, was persecuted because of the deforms on her body, and was never accepted by any group, so she became blind to hide her own loneliness. Kusla said that to open her blind eyes, and in the end, it seemed Fenesis found a goal for the sake of obtaining the recognition of Kusla and the

others, becoming a member of the workshop, to be of equal standing to them, and to complete something with everyone.

In a certain sense, this goal itself was grandiose, but in terms of grandeur, Kusla and Weyland's goal were no lesser than hers. Kusla himself had anticipated to a certain level that Fenesis would say such bombastic words in the process of fulfilling her goal, or offer her own suggestions.

But he never thought that Fenesis would be so stubborn in this sense.

He sighed,

"Being upright and innocent isn't what you said. However, being typically honest doesn't necessarily have to be the right thing to do."

And continued saying,

"There is a just reason as to why I'll plate the gold on the copper block and exchange it for real gold."

They had been boiling mercury in the pot for a while. Kusla was teaching Fenesis how to plate gold or silver using mercury through practical action, but he inadvertently blurted out the reason for plating gold on the copper block, and thus, this outcome.

"All right, all right. I'll just tell you the reason, is that enough?"

Kusla's pandering attitude caused Fenesis to give her usual look of mistrust.

But the moment Kusla was about to speak up,

His eyes were staring intending at the pot with the mercury boiling in them.

"Hey, anyway, stir the mercury first."

"Please do not change the topic. I—"

"Hurry up and stir it! Now!"

"!?"

Fenesis inadvertently shrank back upon seeing Kusla being so agitated, but she turned back to look at the pot filled with mercury.

-Too late.

Kusla got up from his chair, ran to Fenesis, and grabbed her by her slender shoulders.

He then embraced her firmly, his back turned on the pot.

Following that, the mercury in the pot bubbled and expanded, and with the sound of a demon burping, the bubbles splattered at Kusla.

"Ah...!"

"Eh? Huh?"

Fenesis, within Kusla's clutches, was dumbfounded.



At the same time, the mercury in the pot continued to let out little explosions, the frothing bubbles causing the workshop to be filled with smoke.

"Hold your breath."

Kusla barely managed to eke those words out, and hurried out of the workshop along with Fenesis. He kicked the door down, ran to the chilling outside, and was finally able to take large gulps of air. After shivering for a while in the frosty winds, he let go of Fenesis in his clutches, removed his shirt, and removed the undershirt.

"Ugh...it's hot! Damn!"

He reached his arms out, brushing the back of his neck, and dipped his head into the water flowing down the water wheel.

The water was so numbingly cold, and the pain on Kusla's body vanished as a result, but he felt a rage surging in his heart.

He pulled his head from the stream, and lashed out at Fenesis,

"When I tell you to stir, stir!"

Fenesis, who did not know the reason why, was slumped there, cringing tentatively. The strange smoke was rising from the workshop behind her, and Kusla felt an unknown rage thinking about how he had to clean up the mess thereafter.

"Goodness...I never failed this bad ever since...my apprenticeship ended."

Kusla grumbled in disgust, and returned to the workshop. He picked up the metal rod Fenesis dropped, dipped it into the furnace, and smashed the charcoal heating the pot. Despite that however, the boiling mercury could not cool down in such a short time. It continued to froth in the pot, like a

stew with the fire too strong. Kusla wanted to pour water over it immediately, but that would only worsen the situation.

After he stuffed the coal deep into the furnace, all he could do was to wait for the temperature to drop. In a certain sense, this was the end of the incident. He then opened all the windows, and went outside the room.

After a few gulps of fresh air, Fenesis, looking teary, picked up Kusla's coat, and stared at him.

"E-erm..."

"Give me that."

Kusla snatched the uppergarments from Fenesis' hands, and flapped it.

Fenesis noticed some silver blobs falling from it.

That was the mercury that boiling in the pot.

"Mercury ends up like that when it's suddenly boiled. Bubbles will form, and then it'll fly."

"Hm?"

"I told you to stir, didn't I? To avoid such a situation, you have to keep stirring."

"Ah..."

Fenesis began to look as though she was about to bawl, and Kusla sighed, seemingly releasing all the rage within him, barely managed to suppress the anger.

Seeing Fenesis in such a state, his mind calmed down slightly.

He pondered over his choice of words, and said,

"It's my fault for not explaining things to you. I've been teasing and lying to you so much that you won't believe me, and that's my fault."

"! That's."

Fenesis shook her head.

"More importantly, your injury..."

It seemed what caused Fenesis to be so flustered was not because of her own failure, but that Kusla got injured trying to protect her.

Kusla gently placed his hand on the back of his neck, stating briefly,

"I'm not bothered too much. What about you?"

"!!"

Fenesis shook her head more furiously than before.

Kusla lowered his shoulders weakly, his eyes upon her.

"This isn't much as long as you're fine."

"Eh?"

Kusla put his hand on Fenesis' head while the latter was looking up at him, and her head shrank back. Kusla then rubbed her head forcefully, teasing her.

He gave a gentle smile, and Fenesis's ears twitched gently.

"So, that's how it is with plating."

"Eh?"

"You can say that it's an improper way of accumulating wealth. However, like this incident, such things do happen in the alchemist world, where

unpredictable things may occur. In such situations, you feel empowered when you have valuable items with you. For example, someone did something foolish in the workshop, and if there's a need to settle the problem with money, what do you do? The Knights won't be cleaning our butts for everything, and we don't have anyone we can actually request, especially now that we are headed towards a town located in the center of a war. We need some form of fortune to be able to protect everyone in such a place, but..."

Kusla watched Fenesis turn her face back,

"However, it is awkward to say such things, I guess. I really am embarrassed to say such things when someone with the nickname of 'interest' would actually do something for someone else."

"!"

Fenesis widened her green eyes, and looked back at Kusla.

"Am I wrong?"

Kusla showed a crooked sneer, as though he could not rein in his laughter.

And with Kusla asking this, Fenesis recovered. She showed a self-reproaching look, and lowered her head.

Kusla again reached out to touch her head, and let out a little sigh,

"The smoke will scatter soon. Let's go in—"

Kusla sneezed as he said so

Fenesis lifted her face upon hearing that, and suddenly looked around. However, she did not find what she wanted, so she could only remove the

triangular scarf wrapped over her head to wipe Kusla's body. Perhaps she was trying her best to redeem herself.

"I rather you clean up after your own mess than wipe my body."

"Uu..."

Fenesis' ears drooped in sadness, her eyeballs looking up at Kusla.

"I'm not scolding you now. Alchemists will suffer failures over and over again before they achieve success. It's very important to deal with things after your own failures, understand?"

Understand? in response, Fenesis gave a serious look, and nodded slowly.

"Also, about plating."

"..."

"This might be a little different from your beliefs."

Kusla gave Fenesis an apologetic look, and she immediately shook her head gaudily,

"Shall we continue?"

Fenesis was about to answer, only for her eyes to suddenly look away. Kusla too immediately realized that figure. It was Weyland, who arrived from the floor above.

"Woooo~ And I was wondering what's with this strange smell here~"

Weyland saw the pot in the furnace, smoke everywhere, and Kusla being wet as the latter stood by the water canal; he probably realized immediately what happened.

"So the plating failed, huh~? We'll be headed to Kazan a few days later, you know~? It'll be too late if we don't hide anything valuable on us now~"

Weyland's overly blatant words caused Kusla to immediately shiver. Of course, it was not because it was cold outside, but due to another reason.

And while she leaned on him, seemingly supporting him, Fenesis' ears twitched.

"Those We'll be paying for our own trip to Kazan, so we got to pull a fast one on them through foul play."

A man's mouth can never be shut. Kusla did not want to thoroughly experience the meaning of these words, and so he tried to shut Weyland up.

"Weyland—"

However, Weyland was faster.

"We don't like to splurge on food and drinks, but we need to spend to eat well~. Hard to do that when we're scrimping~ got to steal as much as we can here~"

"!"

That one decisive line caused Kusla to inadvertently click his thought, and he noticed that it was unbecoming of himself to fail so badly.

Fenesis slowly let him.

He knew it would happen, but Kusla could not help but glance over there.

"...Y-You..."

The green eyes were filled with tears, and Fenesis' beast ears were pricking, her hands clenching firmly at the handkerchief she was using to wipe Kusla fervently, and she growled,

"You are really terrible!"

"Hm-?" Weyland shot a relaxed look at Kusla from within the workshop.

Kusla looked up at the sky, gave a pretentious sneeze, and then sighed impatiently.

Gold to lead, and lead to gold. Everything continues to change.

Kusla and the others symbolized the saying appropriately, and they were about to change their place of activity. Their next stop was Kazan—the largest mining town in the one pagan country in the world, Ratria.

There might be unknown knowledge and skills unbeknownst to the world, or clues to an unexpected discovery. However, as it was a land ruled by Pagans, while the skills might be extraordinary, there would be some demagoguery involved, knowledge that were unsuited to be revealed to the world. In fact, after filtering the skills and knowledge found in Pagan land, those that were slapped with a forbidden seal would never see the light of day again.

To Kusla and the other Alchemists, they wanted to obtain everything, no matter what it was, as long as it was something useful. This went double for knowledge and skills born in pagan land. Those were crystals of knowledge born of completely different thinking concepts, and some might bring unexpected boost to their own technology.

Thus, Kusla and the others hoped to obtain such knowledge and skills no matter what, before they were sealed off.

The massive organization called the Claudius Knights conquered Kazan, wanting to convert it into a town with Orthodox teachings, and accept it. This massive organization was basically a huge merchant guild with many outlets all over the world, and on this basis, they had respectable authority and military power, so much that it could be said to be the largest organization in the world. Kusla's group were Alchemists hired under these Knights.

Furthermore, the Knights hired the alchemists not for ridiculous reasons like develop elixirs of immortality or turning lead into gold. Those were merely wild guesses by the people in the town. The Knights hired the alchemists to improve the mining techniques in the mines they controlled, and how to effectively refine the ores that were in circulation. Also, it included how to refine metallic materials, primarily metal. Another reason why alchemists were hired was because the overwhelming finances and political protection from the Knights was a necessity to them.

Both sides had always maintained a give-take relationship.

Alchemists appeared to be mere bystanders that caused many to think they were free, but they were actually bonded by being employees. Thus, even if there was some great metallurgical skill discovery in kazan, if this knowledge or skill was to trigger issues of faith or other kings, the Knights would weigh in on the losses coolly before pondering if they should reveal it. They would never put the development of technology for the sake of a mere alchemist. They would only consider whether they could benefit.

Kusla's group, hired by them, had no freedom to defy their employer's wishes.

Thus, if they wanted to obtain the technology that was to be sealed due to their employer's losses, they would have to seize the moment before the employer weighs in on the potential losses, for this opportunity would vanish in an instant.

If they missed out on it, and if such knowledge and technology was to be kept in the massive library of the Knights, it would be impossible for them to see it again, unless they were highly ranked in the Knights. If it was knowledge passed on through word of mouth, the people who knew about that would probably be murdered.

Thus, Kusla and the others wanted to be part of the migrants moving to revive the newly conquered Kazan. They could only do that, if they wanted to seize on an opportunity.

In their pursuit for their own dreams, some Alchemists would even kill their own kin. It was because they had such thinking that they were viewed by others as heretics, and were persecuted. The knowledge they delved into would mostly involve a massive amount of money, and thus, many wanted to kill them. But for their dreams, they would rather continue on such a perilous occupation as an alchemist.

Fortunately for them however, Kusla's group managed to join the migrants that were headed to Kazan.

They coaxed the leader of the Gulbetty blacksmith guild to work with them and create a replica of the legendary metal, Damascus Steel, and offered it to the Knights managing the migrants, fulfilling their plans to join in.

As to whether this method would garner them rewards, they did not care. They only cared about joining the migrants. Also, the technology to create this fake metal was important.

Because of that, Kusla went to the blacksmiths' street in Gulbetty that afternoon despite suffering some minor injuries from the bubbling mercury, undoubtedly for this skill.

Fenesis probably hoped that she could be independent as quickly as possible ever since the Damascus Steel incident, but she would always stay by Kusla's side and learn. This time however, she did not follow. When Kusla left the workshop, Fenesis, who was lied to again, gave him a reproaching, vengeful stare.

"That thing wants to be an alchemist of an equal standing to me, huh?"

Kusla thought. He felt speechless, but the recklessness shown by Fenesis really delighted him.

Thinking about this, he reached his destination, and quickly put aside the thoughts in his mind first, coughing lightly,

"Mr Sophites, are you in? Mr Sophites?"

Kusla placed his elbow on the door, leaning over as he knocked on it unhurriedly, calling his name.

He was in a corner of the blacksmiths area, and there were blacksmiths who finished their dinner, ready to return to work. They were staring at Kusla intently, many of them showing no intention of hiding their disgust. Kusla however was used to it, so he paid no heed to them.

However, there had to be a limit to them. While their malicious looks were slightly abnormal, it was similarly within Kusla's expectations.

"What's the matter now? Yapping out there."

The door opened, and Sophites, practically an elder amongst the blacksmiths, revealed his face.

“Oh. Good day, Mr Sophites.”

“Such a vile greeting. Something you need?”

“We should be the ones apologizing for intrusion.”

Kusla snickered like a mischievous brat, and Sophites could not help but show a wry smile on his face. Kusla had a feeling that this old man had quite a few similarities to an alchemist.

The older generation of blacksmiths arrived at this town with only their tools and skills, building up a town that had nothing to a bustling one as it was. They were ordinary people, but were as fearless as alchemists who desired to reveal the world God created for them. Such fearlessness was how they ended up being very accepting.

Thus, al Sophites could do was to give a bitter smile despite Kusla hailing the person acting as Guild Leader merely a few days back as ‘one of us’.

He took a step back, “She’s inside.” and saying this, he let Kusla into the house.

“You visited her house before this?”

Sophites walked in front, not looking back as he asked,

“Irine’s house? My answer will be no. I can guess the situation there would be like.”

“Well, I suppose things are going as you expect. I might say you fellows understand this better.”

Kusla shrugged, and Sophites did not bother to say anymore. If Fenesis was here, she probably would show a despondent look.

Both of them chatted as they entered the house, and the young, cheery looking lady—Irine was inside. Unlike Fenesis, her secretive, pretty face was filled with some sharpness, and she would be popular with men in places like inns. At this point, Irine was grinding the iron filings, adjusting the teeth in order to sharpen the rasp, looking displeased to a point where her face was terrifying. The nice hair was not as red as the scorching metal piece, but it was still a scarlet red. Whenever she struck at it, the red hair would sway along like a stray cat swaying its tail due to displeasure.

“Irine, your boss is here.”

Sophites went towards Irine as he said this.

His face was giving a teasing smile, and because of that, Kusla found himself increasingly unable to hate this old man.

“The Knights gave you the permit to come along with us, so you’re our assistant now. If you have anything you’re unhappy about, go talk it out with the Knights.”

Once Kusla said that, ‘zing’ he heard the sound of metal being rubbed. Irine lifted her head, and Kusla merely shook his chin slightly, their eyes meeting. Irine again silently went back to hammering, and Kusla simply told her,

“And besides, you can no longer stay in this town now.”

Hearing those words, Irine’s hands stopped.

“There are probably people saying that you’re a traitor who sold your soul to an Alchemist. I didn’t visit your house because it’s a hassle, but since you’re hammering things here, I suppose that means your house is too dangerous to remain in, no?”

The relationship between Alchemists and the town Blacksmiths were always tense. Blacksmiths had to use the water wheel for their work and the mixing of materials, and these facilities would require a gaudy fee, so they had no choice but to borrow money from the Knights. In contrast, the Alchemists could be said to be affiliated to those Knights...and nothing else. Furthermore, blacksmiths would be proud of their own creations, and heavily valued honor. Alchemists however practically did not care about this, and merely pursued their own goals.

The relationship between Alchemists and Blacksmiths was basically that of twins with completely opposite personalities.

In such a tense atmosphere, Irine defected to the Alchemists for the sake of her own dreams. Kusla was mentioning her situation, that the blacksmiths' hatred of Irine, an ex-ally, was far beyond that towards the alchemists whom they were enemies with already.

The doors and wooden windows of Irine's house were probably smashed, and the furnace of the house representing the house of the people, independent of everyone, was destroyed. If it was burned down, every person living in the streets would have to bear responsibility. However, if their hatred towards Irine was beyond that of the shame that would occur with the arson, they probably would have no qualms in burning the house down. An Alchemist's workshop was often burned.

In any case, Kusla did not assume that she could live a stable life in such situations.

There was only one reason Kusla could think of as to why Irine would move to Sophites' house; she probably wanted to protect herself from the blacksmiths' harrassment.

"So, what's the matter?"

Irine continued with her grinding and hammering. Kusla pondered for a while, and answered.

"The rains caused flooding in the river, and the Azami's Crest took a little detour. It looks like it'll be a few days until the forces headed towards Kazan arrive."

"So?"

"Think about it. We're headed for a long journey together, and Kazan is a place still weary from the fighting. Since we have some time, it's good to first build up some level of trust."

Irine remained silent for a while.

However, she certainly did hear Kusla's words, so Kusla was calmly waiting for her answer.

"Isn't it ridiculous? The man who threatened me to create Damascus Steel is now telling me to build up trust."

"Ridiculous? In that case, why do you think old man Sophites let me in?"

Hearing Kusla's words, Sophites could not help but snicker, only to sigh.

Irine was an orphan born of foreign lands, and came to this town to seek a living. She probably had talent in blacksmithing, and soon after, distinguished herself in the workshop that took her in, and even married the master of the workshop. Her deceased husband was one of the influential people to this town, of the same generation as Sophites.

But Kusla had a strong impression that Irine got married not out of love, but because her master wanted to give everything he had for his best disciple.

The only blacksmith of the old era still alive, Sophites, probably viewed Irine as his grandchild for this particular reason.

Of course, that feisty personality of hers caused Sophites much headache in some way.

"Irine. They're the ones kicking you towards the direction you really want to go to, no?"

"I prefer if you say that they're giving me a push."

"This brat's only willing to move if someone gives her a hard push from behind. It's great that you are willing to do this for her. Are you listening, Irine?"

Sophites' tone became a little rigid, and Irine inadvertently straightened up.

As a blacksmith, she probably got told off fiercely in this workshop.

"...I, am."

"This journey tow Kazan is not like how it was when you arrived in this town. Everyone pitied you and assisted you in all kinds of ways. The migrant group are all aiming for treasure, no different from bandits. They left their hometown, with no intention of returning home, and are prepared to rob and profit. In such situations, the more companions you have, the better."

The words of one with such experiences certainly bore more weight.

Irine nodded unwillingly, and glanced at Kusla.

And Kusla caught her stare, interrupting,

"I'm not intending to come here and shake hands with you, going 'Let's be friends'. We still have a few days to prepare, and we have the materials in

our workshop, while you have the skills. Most importantly, you know how to create such an amazing metal.”

Kusla was referring to the fake Damascus Steel, and Irine was obsessed with blacksmithing. No matter how blatant Kusla’s praise was, Irine was unable to hide her elation. She probably would be perturbed by her own delight.

“...S-so, what are you trying to get at?”

“I hope you can teach us all kinds of blacksmithing knowledge, and we have some things to teach you.”

Irine widened her eyes in shock, only to show a ‘I won’t be bluffed’ expression later on.

“This is—”

“We don’t need you to go into detail when teaching us. Our speciality is to duplicate with our eyes. I’m thinking that you might as well work in our workshop rather than hammer away here. I’m thinking that you’ll enjoy your time there; in any case, that is an Alchemist workshop with all kinds of materials, materials that many outstanding blacksmiths wouldn’t have in theirs.”

“Uu...”

“I do feel that it’s good to know what we can do, and what we can’t. In case anything happens, we’ll be able to help each other out.”

This was an action that was thoroughly based on logic.

Anything they could used would be used, anything they could try would be tried.

Alchemists were creatures that continued forward in this manner.

"I understand if you hate me, and it's fine to despise me. Result-wise, I'm the one who convinced you to leave this town you're used to staying in. But blacksmithing and metallurgy has nothing to do with whether a person likes or hates someone, right? I just feel that this benefits everyone, and that's why I came here. The time has been short, but you are someone who once led a GUild. I am looking forward to seeing your calm decision."

Sophites' shoulders shuddered slightly as he chuckled. Irine gave a displeased look, seemingly peeved. She understood that if she was to refuse at this point, *Who's the one being childish now?* she would be seen through.

Also, when Kusla mentioned the many tools and materials in an Alchemist's workshop, Irine's expression betrayed her answer."

Anyone obsessed with metallurgy and blacksmithing would be attracted to an Alchemist's workshop.

Irine remained silent for a while.

However, this silence merely lasted as long as it took for a person to drown.

"...Can I really, work as I want to?"

Kusla shrugged, saying,

"Alchemists are so reviled, because they have too much freedom."

Sophites let out a laugh, and Irine placed her hands on her hips, seemingly surrendering.



Irine originally intended to make trips between Sophites' house and the workshop, but metallurgy work would take nights at times, and most importantly, there was not much time until they depart for Kazan.

Later on, Irine changed her mind. Since she was able to do whatever she wanted to, she might as well. Thus, she abided by her own wishes, and decided to stay on Kusla's workshop. She wanted to hurry and pack her belongings before going to the workshop, but Kusla was not the gentleman who would lend a helping hand.

I'll be waiting at the workshop, Kusla left those words behind, and turned to leave. Sophites patted Kusla on the back, and this action seemed to indicate 'I'll be leaving Irine to you'. At the same time, it also had the meaning of 'if something is to happen to her, I'll never forgive you'. Certainly, that encompassed the fatherly concern he had for Irine.

Kusla showed an undaunted, Alchemist-like smile.

After a wordless exchange, Kusla left Sophites' house, and head off to the workshop.

He arrived at a cross junction with the road leading to the market, and encountered Weyland and Fenesis.

"What's the matter~?"

As usual, Weyland dragged on the end of his words as he greeted Kusla, while Fenesis beside him frantically pulled back her hand that was outstretched towards the cloth bag Weyland was holding. She turned her head away, and quickly stuffed what she was holding into her mouth as though she was trying to hide it. However, Kusla spotted what appeared to be raisins.

Weyland typically would not eat such things; certainly, he bought these for Fenesis.

Weyland did not appear to desire an argument with Kusla, but he would do this to anyone whenever he had a girl with him.

“She’s coming to the workshop. I’m going to prepare.”

“Great~. I got a lot of things to ask~”

Weyland looked hopeful, and for some reason, he sounded weird.

“Do anything to her, and there’ll be a fight.”

“I won’t do such a thing~”

“Speaking of which...”

Kusla glanced at the other bag slung over Weyland’s shoulder, saying,

“You went to the market? If you’re preparing for the trip, discuss with me first.”

“Hm? Ahh, that’s not it~. I had to go get a batch of craft tools~”

“Craft tools?”

There are some Alchemists who would carry gemstones around, but those were certainly not for appearance sake. These gemstones seemed to have some significance, like Sapphires being able to cure poison, Amethyst would improve knowledge, Emeralds could discern lies, but these effects appeared to be a little more effective than prayers to God. The main reason why Alchemists would carry them around was for practicality, that in case anything happened, they could exchange these gemstones for Gold.

Thus, what happened in the morning that infuriated Fenesis was a half-truth. The people who were so reviled in the towns could only rely on their skills or gold. Alchemists were not blacksmiths nor merchants, they had no way of obtaining money. In that case, they could only rob.

But despite this, Kusla looked completely intrigued, for that bag containing the craft tools looked a little strange. Certainly, if one was to put on the contents inside the bag, he would resemble royalty.

“What’s with all that?”

“Presents~”

“Heh?”

Kusla could not help but ask back, and suddenly looked towards Fenesis.

Fenesis noticed Kusla’s stare, and glared back, pouting.

“I said that I would give some to little Ul though~”

Weyland noticed their stares, and quipped,

“I-it doesn’t suit me anyway.”

Fenesis said so, and suddenly turned her head aside.

It seemed she was still petty over the fact that Kusla made her dress up like a country girl. Alarmingly, she did not mesh with the dress up of one, probably because of her hair color and petite body. However, Kusla had a feel that gemstones would fit her, and though he had this thought, he had no intention to speak up.

“A present? To the girls you picked up in this town?”

Kusla asked as he shot Weyland a look, and the latter did not answer, merely smiling,

“That’s a lot.”

Kusla was dumbfounded as he said this.

“So, what about you? Did he buy some nice sweets for you?”

“Th-this is not it!”

“Then what is it?”

Kusla looked at the bag Fenesis was holding onto, and the latter panicked, turning away to hide the items behind.

“N-nothing at all.”

An Alchemist’s curiosity could kill a cat. The more Fenesis tried to hide herself, the more Kusla wanted to see through her. However, there was the plating incident from before, and if he was to continue probing her, she would pout again. When that happened, things would get troublesome, so Kusla did not probe into the matter any further.

“Humph, whatever. In any case, once Irine arrives, we’ll be getting busier. We need to start preparing for the trip.”

“Better clear up the mess on the failed plating~.”

“...Understood.”

Kusla said, and let out a sigh.

This conversation probably sounded too spiteful, for Fenesis’ lips were twitching as she seemed to have something she wanted to say. However, she did not, and continued to stare at the floor as she walked.

"?"

Kusla glanced at Fenesis' sidelong face as he walked on, and when he was able to see the workshop, his eyes caught sight of something else. A boy was standing in front of the workshop, dressed in a familiar, crude attire of a mountain tribe.

The boy noticed Kusla's group approaching, and his eyes first fall upon Fenesis.

"Is there anything~?"

Weyland asked, and the boy nodded, seemingly remembering his mission.

"You two, come over to the Knights Headquarters."

"Heh? Is there something~"

"I don't know."

It was a standard messenger's answer. Weyland sighed impatiently. Beside him, Kusla unlocked the door, and entered the workshop. Weyland too was able to enter, only to suddenly stop, and handed over the bag of raisins to the boy.

"We can't finish it. For you~"

The boy was a little taken aback, but upon seeing that it was raisins inside, he could not help but show a smile.

He looked a little immature whenever he smiled, and perhaps, he might be younger than his appearance implied.

As he thanked them, the boy seemed to notice Fenesis' stare.

The girl was giving a yearning look at the bag that was handed to the boy's hands, but that was probably a subconscious action. Once the boy's stare met hers, she was taken aback.

The boy suddenly reached into the bag, and grabbed a handful of raisins before handing the rest to Fenesis. He smiled at a dumbfounded Fenesis, and turned to leave.

Weyland laughed as his shoulders shook. *These two are really immature.*

""And you worry too much too, Kusla."

"Hah."

Kusla shrugged, ignoring Weyland's words as he continued,

"But what's with the Knights summoning us now? They aren't going to cancel our trip to Kazan now, right?"

"I don't want to think about that...but let's go first. Making those guys unhappy isn't going to benefit us~"

"Agreed."

Kusla answered, and Weyland placed the obtained goods at the bottom level of the workshop.

Fenesis stood blankly at the door, staring in the direction where the boy vanished.

"Hey."

Kusla called out to her, and she jolted, cringing. The bag tilted over, and the contents spilled out.

Always worrying?

That certainly was the case.

“Clean up the dropped raisins, and put your stuff down. Or are you going to wait for Irine alone here?”

It seemed Fenesis really imagined such a scene, but she probably could not think of anything with regards to Irine, since they never had any interaction before. She obeyed Kusla’s words begrudgingly, picked up the dropped raisins, and placed the bag in the kitchen.

“Goodness.”

Kusla muttered, and suddenly noticed another bag Fenesis brought back which was left on the table. Weyland did not bring this downstairs, which meant that he did not buy it, but that he held it for Fenesis.

What is that? Driven by curiosity, Kusla opened the bag slightly and peered into the contents. He then sensed Fenesis’ return, and hurriedly sealed the bag again.

At that moment, Fenesis finally noticed that she left without taking the bag. She took large strides to the table, grabbed the bag furiously, and again teetered to the kitchen.

“...”

Kusla watched her back, and scratched his head.

There was a herb used to treat burn wounds inside the bag.

Kusla deliberately played dumb as he asked Fenesis while the latter rushed back.

“What did you buy?”

“I-it has nothing to do with you.”

Kusla did not ask any further.

However, he felt foolish to be delighted by this, and felt gaudy as a result. If he was to take this gaudiness into consideration, it was true that he was always worrying.

The Knights headquarters was built upon the premier, wealthy area of Gulbetty. It was said this building was originally built by the Guild that once ruled the town, but the Knights wanted to hurry and exert control on the town, so they had their eyes on this Guild, devoured it, and took over the building. It was a world where the strong preyed upon the weak, and this was a classic example.

In this world, freedom was merely an insignificant concept no matter the place. Alchemists could lie and say they were doing research, and request for massive funding from the Knights; they also had the privilege of being exempt from the Church's persecution even as they delve into strange experimentation. Ultimately, that was merely because they were protected by the Knights. If the knowledge in their minds become dated or obsolete, they would instantly become disposable waste.

Nobody could deny that this was the truth to life, and Alchemists, who valued the logic of all things, had no choice but to accept this truth.

But this one fact left Kusla a little bitter.

For the ones stopping people from pursuing their dreams would always be reality.

"Even so, we can't just leave them aside as a bunch of people that are simply pursuing their daydreams."

Kusla was woken up by this one line.

After being summoned to Headquarters, Kusla's group found the Herald officer who was in full charge of the Kazan route Gren Alzen, and the latter was waiting for them. It certainly seemed he was a lackey, given his title as a Herald of the Azami's Crest, and he was given a high position, for he was in charge of notifying others that the King was passing through, and get the towns to be on standby. He was dressed in a fur coat, with an ornamented sword of no practical purpose dangling at the waist. The latter item certainly signified that the authority given to this man for any typical matter.

Alzen was not so old that his back was arched, but he liked to clasp his hands behind his back whenever he talked. He was standing as he talked, probably to show respect to Autris, but in any case, he was obviously much more dignified than the latter. 'We cannot simply let them be', Alzen was serious in tone as he said this, but he was referring to a bunch of wanderers said to be searching for the 'Golden Sheep' that was mentioned in ancient myths. It appeared that the Crest of Azami expanded on their search perimeter as they verified the safety of the North.

"What do you want us to do with them? The myth of the Golden Sheep isn't rare, right? I heard that there's a lot of such myths amongst the wanderers."

Kusla mentioned this, but not because of Fenesis, who was standing diagonally behind him.

Even amongst Alchemists, who lived in the walls of towns, there were a few myths of varying authenticity. It was not strange for a strange myth or two to occur amongst the drifting wanderers.

"Hm. I'm not telling you to do anything to them. However, this matter involves the country that is ruled by the Queen that is unwilling to abandon Pagan beliefs. The folks pursuing the Golden Sheep are in the land of Klasse...in other words, an important area south of Kazan. This is a problem."

Alzen probably assumed that he was smart, which was why he spoke in such a roundabout manner. Or perhaps he was just fooling around, wanting his listeners to think.



"Do you not understand?"

Looking at that wordless expression however, it was probably the latter.

"That is the case. In other words, the Golden Sheep might be an euphemism. Those people are actually speculators searching for gold mines. Wars are basically a contest of financial resources. Now that I mention it, the answer's obvious, isn't it?"

"...So the wanderers are called over to their lands to search for gold mines and assist in war expenses?"

"Yes. In any case, that place now is ruled under the same Orthodox realm. If we are to exert force on that land and capture the wanderers for interrogation, we will not be able to stand politically. Thus, I hope that you make a trip to Klasse while you are on your way to Kazan. There is still some time till departure, and you may flip through the old books in your workshop. I suppose you people are free at the moment, no?"

If it is something that can be used, they would use anything.

Kusla shrugged.

"It doesn't matter whether this myth is real or not. In any case, Klasse will become a piece of land ruled under us Knights, and it's not good to have a group of unknown people wander around. You should know this very well."

Kusla sensed that Alzen shot Fenesis a look.

"And if anything is to happen, His Highness will be pleased."

Alzen was affiliated to the Knights squadron that was in charge of moving migrants to the conquered Pagan towns and restore security and order there. Leading these forces of the Azami's Crest was a regal noble of the

South–Archduke Kratal. However, it would be disrespectful to address him directly by his title, so typically, they would address him as ‘Your Highness’.

The Herald’s words were filled with intent, and even the governor lifted his head. Kusla could not help but raise an eyebrow.

Certainly, Alzen intended to show some results. He might be eyeing a high position at Kazan, the position of nobility to seize control of authority. If he was to report to the superiors that on the way to Kazan, the forces discovered gold, his own reputation would increase exponentially, and he might even be ordered to manage the mine.

However, Kusla, and even Weyland were looking enthusiastic.

Kusla tersely replied,

“You’re asking us to investigate, right? But we can’t guarantee the results.”

Autris, who remained seated behind the desk all this while, was the master of this room, but he was overwhelmed by the vigor of the Herald, and had a faint presence as a result. At this moment, his lips showed a devious smirk. He was once fooled by Kusla and Weyland, so he probably was feeling elated seeing that Alzen was unable to control them.

But before Alzen could realize, the smile vanished off Autris’ face, as the latter said,

“Dear Herald, these two are adept in skill, but they are dubious in reputation. I shall have a few words to them.”

“Hm.”

Alzen glanced aside at the Alchemists, whose reactions were not as he desired, and nodded.

Kusla's group had fallen on Autris' bad side, but the latter did not have the authority to revoke their migration permit to Kazan, so they could simply respond as they wished. Right when Kusla had such a thought.

"Speaking of which, duty-wise, I am allowed to delegate exactly when the people in the group are able to reach which particular town."

What's with that? Kusla and Weyland inadvertently exchanged glances.

"First, we'll despatch scouts to investigate, have them report to the people in the group that is waiting in the meantime, assess the safety by sending in the vanguard, then the merchants of the Baggage Corps to discuss with the locals, and secure the lodging, food, water and fuel supplies for the group. After them will be the main group, followed by the rearguard. I shall repeat this procedure over and over again until we reach Kazan."

Only a person who commanded all these would be able to say such words so fluently.

But what exactly was he implying?

Seeing Kusla look back perplexedly, Alzen stated without restraint.

"Of course, this includes the priority of who gets to enter the town."

"!"

Kusla and Weyland did not gasp so much as to show such a reaction, but their eyes faltered for a moment. The one in charge of managing the group's advance certainly would not have missed out on their reactions.

"You are intending to get hold of the knowledge and skills that will be hidden, right? If it is for the sake of the right beliefs, that heretical inquisition of the Choir that even nitpicks the way we yawn will enter the town along with the scouts that are guarding the town. After that, it'll be

the headquarters of His Highness and the officials that are to manage the town. You will be assigned to the rearguard like the blacksmiths and merchants. Also, the Knights Headquarters will be sending in the Grand Alchemist, Professor Marcus Lloyd, and since he will be tasked with recording the knowledge and skills, he will be acting along with the heretical inquisition. Now then."

The Herald announced his plans proudly,

"What is my duty then?"

After discussions on whether they were taboo or not, the knowledge and skills that existed in Kazan would be sealed accordingly.

But even so, as it was by work of man, it would take some time for them to finish their investigations.

For Kusla's group, who intended to obtain new knowledge, the priority to enter the town was very important.

And Alzen, standing in front of them, was on the commander on when the migrants would enter the town.

"It appears that this will be of mutual interest to us."

Alzen did not smile, stating it as though it was a matter of fact.

Kusla glanced aside at Weyland, and the latter did the same.

While this was a situation where their hands were forced, that they were caught by their weakness, Kusla's group managed to make the correct call in the nick of time.

"That is the case."

Kusla answered, and for the first time, Alzen showed a smile. In this situation, Autris was the only one gritting his teeth, seeing this conversation proceed smoothly while he was left aside.

"I shall inform you of the details when we proceed. Before then, you will need to make your investigations."

Kusla's group nodded, and as they had nothing to gain by staying, they were about to turn and leave, "Speaking of which." before Alzen continued.

"It appears that sample can no longer be created again."

Kusla understood very well that he was referring to the Damascus Steel.

They were afraid that a sword made of Damascus steel would be lost or stolen, and to help smoothen the negotiation process, they submitted the Damascus Steel directly to Archduke Kratal, and the Archduke immediately ordered that they be part of the migrants to kazan. However, someone well-informed like Alzen would have probably heard that Kusla's group got chosen because of the Damascus Steel.

Thus.

Kusla naturally could expect them to wonder if they could get a find sword upon hearing of what happened. Because of that, the gang spoke with Irine beforehand, and agreed.

"Forging it is not a problem. However, we asked the governor beforehand, and even he could not obtain some of the materials required."

A sword forged with such a precious metal like Damascus Steel would grant absolute authority to its widler.

But that would be due to how rare Damascus Steel was. If they were to try recreating it again, it would diminish the value of the Damascus Steel in Archduke Kratal's hands.

Thus, rather than saying that it was the case, the governor's words that 'Some materials couldn't be obtained' fit into the Archduke's narrative. It could prevent anyone else from possessing this Damascus Steel, and assure the value of the sword in his hands.

The Herald probably would not think of such a foolish thing and have a noble like that Archduke keep an eye on him.

"I see."

Alzen seemed to be saying it for the sake of it, and remained nonchalant as he did not press with the issue. He probably considered the risk of Kusla's group reporting him to the authorities, saying that he had eyes on the Damascus Steel.

Leaving aside whether Kusla was able to get along with this Herald, at the very least, he understood that the Herald was a decent negotiator. In fact, Alzen did not order them, but made a proposal to them with regards to the investigations on the migrants.

"Now then, we shall be off for our preparations."

"Certainly."

Kusla's group left the group, *good grief*, and he let out a sigh.

"Another strange job for us."

"I wonder if he's trying to set a trap for us~"

"Trick us, and force us to create Damascus Steel?"

"Hmm...suppose not. If we're to report him, he'll be exposed for going against his master."

Of course. Alchemists were Alchemists. What they informed the Archduke was completely different from what they told Alzen. After offering the sword, the Archduke asked if this Damascus Steel could be mass produced, but they told the Archduke that the blacksmith who knew of the ingredients and composition had died, and the method to smelt Damascus Steel would forever be a mystery. The Archduke did not order them to seek a new way to make it, and it was likely that he assumed it would be better to lose the art of smelting it so as to preserve the value of Damascus Steel in his hands.

However, the Herald certainly would not be asking the Archduke on such matters, so Kusla had no worries of being exposed even though he lied.

They continued down the vacant corridor, and Kusla suddenly looked over at the silent Fenesis.

"Anyway, do you have an idea on what the Herald just said?"

Fenesis heard Kusla's voice, and gave a disgusted look. However, it was because they were arguing just a while back, and yet Kusla was talking to her so casually.

"You're a wanderer, just like them, you know?"

However, Alzen probably knew of Fenesis' heritage, and it was because he considered this matter that he got Kusla's group over to talk. Fenesis too must have thought about that.

Weyland too understood what was going on as he listened in on their conversation wordlessly.

However, Fenesis noted with a slightly dejected look.

“I don’t know anything.”

They were all called wanderers, but this world was too vast, and there were many people drifting around out there.

Kusla shook his shoulders slightly, and Fenesis looked a little peeved as she said,

“B-but, I do know of the myth of the Golden Sheep.”

“Fwah.”

Weyland inadvertently broke out a rare chuckle.

And Fenesis appeared to have realized that she was acting tough again for no significant reason at all.

The face under the hood began to redden.

“It’s really encouraging to hear that.”

Kusla calmly said, and put his hand on Fenesis’ head, only for the latter to shake it off in disgust.

Weyland cackled away gleefully, and Kusla sensed the value of teasing Fenesis’ childish self. The latter groaned deeply, and reached her hands for her head, either to readjust her hood, or to cover her head.

“Well, if we’re going to investigate on myths, we can do it without having some special knowledge partner.”

Kusla said, and Fenesis appeared as though she was about to break into tears, looking at Kusla.

“Also, my burn isn’t hurting me much.”

“!”

Fenesis was saying this and that, and yet she went to purchase herbs to treat burn wounds; she stopped in her tracks. Kusla and Weyland continued on, and only the former looked back, saying,

"If every little thing is enough to rattle you, it means you're still far from being a peerless Alchemist."

Fenesis inadvertently lifted her head, wanting to say something, but unable to speak up. For Fenesis, who had been persecuted, her tribe slaughtered, it was probably a heavy-hearted matter that her mistake resulted in someone else being hurt.

"Or are you going to stop here?"

But Kusla's tone remained cold the entire way.

Weyland was already far in front of them. The one who stopped because she was conflicted over her past, the one telling off a certain person, and the one callously moving on; perhaps the image formed by this trio formed a shadow of those headed to Magdala.

"Let's go."

Saying that, Kusla too walked forward. No matter how he thought of Fenesis as being part of his own Magdala, he could not be concerned of her everything. It was like a bodyguard who, no matter how outstanding her was, could not prevent a Princess from committing suicide.

Weyland turned around the corner, vanishing beyond that, and Kusla heard light footsteps teetering behind him.

Soon after, Fenesis caught up, following Kusla diagonally from behind.

Kusla sensed that in such an atmosphere, it would not be strange for her to break down in tears. However, he heard some unexpected words.

"I am...really sorry, for causing that burn on you."

Such a rigid manner of speech caused Kusla to nearly burst into laughter, but he sensed that Fenesis was doing her best. Also, seeing those herbs was enough for him to feel her apology.

"Anyway, I'll let this pass, barely."

Those were sincere words.

Fenesis probably understood this too, Yes, she nodded lightly.

"But that isn't all."

"Hm?"

Kusla turned to Fenesis as he turned around the corner, and stared firmly at those beautiful, emerald eyes of hers.

"There is something else you have to apologize for."

"Eh..."

Kusla said, and Fenesis nearly stopped in her tracks again.

However, it seemed she could not understand what it was, and looked really skeptical.

Kusla tried his best to rein in his laughter, saying,

"You still don't understand?"

"..."

Fenesis bashfully lowered her head dejectedly, and Kusla told her.

"You should apologize for being duped so easily, shouldn't you?"

"..."

A dumbfounded Fenesis tumbled over on the ground.

This is someone worth teasing. Kusla could not help but think. However, he was serious about Fenesis, who was about to stand up.

"If you're duped by others and fall into a trap, we may end up in danger too. Did you forget about how you were duped into saying 'that man's thing'?"

"Ah!"

Fenesis stared at the floor in shock, her hands shaking as they pressed against the floor.

"If you understand, stand up."

Fenesis probably was blaming herself, for she continued to keep her head lowered as she got to her feet.

We're going to be in for a long road ahead of us. Kusla sighed.

"I want you to know that I didn't lie to you just to make you hate me."

Fenesis gave a really displeased look at Kusla, and seemed to be at her limit, saying,

"That sounds like a lie."

"Then you better be on your guard. From now on, try not to show your true feelings as much as possible."

"..."

"As for you being careless and showing me the herbs for treating burns, that's another matter altogether."

"!"

Fenesis' face was flushed red, and Kusla could not help but cackle.

"Well, it's rare for you to be so kind, so I'll accept it. The burn on the back hurts when I'm sleeping."

"Uu..."

Fenesis groaned, and sighed, seemingly having given up.

"...You are...really sly..."

"Do you want to be a companion of this sly person?"

Kusla lowered his head and looked at Fenesis, who frowned back.

"...You told me not to show my real emotion as much as possible."

"Yes I did."

Kusla chuckled as he replied, and Fenesis furiously turned her face aside.

But as they followed Weyland out of the building, Fenesis was not walking diagonally behind Kusla, but beside him.

Act 2

Soon after Kusla and the gang returned to the workshop, Irine arrived with luggage in tow.

Kusla had assumed that she would be bringing back a large pile of them, but she merely brought a few belongings that were barely able to fit into a firm sack slung on her back. It appeared that there would be no problems for her to head out on a journey as she was.

Sophites probably had her pack up.

"No turning back now, you know?"

Kusla gave a teasing smile, and Irine turned her face aside, giving a stoic face as she said,

"This is the third time I made this kind of a decision."

Irine spoke with a pretentiously intimate voice, and entered the workshop to seemingly throw off Kusla. She was unyielding not simply personality wise, but also enthusiastic, never the kind of guest who would arrive just because she was invited. Kusla could sense some form of determination from her; if it was possible, she would loot every material and knowledge in this workshop. Irine was not a pampered princess; she knew very well that she had to establish herself in a place with more than 2 people around. She would be doomed if she were belittled, and the fundamentals of human relationships is that first impressions are key; this line applied not simply to Alchemists themselves.

This was not merely putting on a facade or being stubborn, but a thought process that was practical for any situations.

Kusla did not hate this.

But there was something he was very curious about something.

"Leaving your hometown to come here is one, arriving at this workshop is another, so what's the other one?"

Kusla asked, and the one who answered him was Weyland, wrapping a cloth around the handle of the hammer.

"Marriage, I suppose~?"

Irine glanced aside at Weyland, and then looked at Kusla.

"There are all kinds of Alchemists, aren't there?"

"I can't deny that."

Kusla shrugged, and closed the door.

"There should be a cute one who's completely different from you in this workshop, no? Where is she?"

"I hope you'll try not to have arguments."

"What nonsense are you saying now? That's not what I'm getting at. That girl...she gave me a nudge from behind too, so I want to greet her."

Speaking of which, while Kusla was interrogating Irine, Fenesis seemed to say something to irine.

Believe in luck. if he recalled correctly.

I see. Kusla thought.

"Just to add on, we're cute too~"

Weyland said, and Irine again could not help but show him a strange look.

"There really are all kinds of them."

"She's cleaning up downstairs. Anyway, put down your luggage first."

Kusla saw the luggage Irine carried into the workshop, and could not help but worry if there were bottles containing medicine or powder.

However, Irine did not do as she was told immediately, instead giving him a taunting look.

"One thing I want to ask."

"What is it?"

"What is that person?"

"What do you mean?"

Kusla asked back. He was not intending to buy time or bluff Irine; he simply did not understand the intent behind her question.

"She's someone from this workshop."

"...But she's dressed up as a nun."

"Ahh...she was from the monastery. It's said that she was born in a distant desert, and drifted here."

"..."

Despite hearing Kusla's explanation, Irine's expression showed no change.

Did she see Fenesis' ears somewhere before? Kusla wondered, and then,

"Are you going to ask if little Ul was bought with money~"

"Huh!?"

Upon hearing Weyland's words, Kusla was the first to blurt that out.

"Well, that girl certainly doesn't fit in a workshop with only two men living in it. Isn't it normal for her to have such thoughts~?"

"That's..."

Kusla cleared his throat. He finally understood.

"Ahh, you're asking if she's our toy?"

"Wait!"

Irine shot Kusla a scathing look, but the latter merely sighed wordlessly.

"Well, she's not a toy for fooling around with."

Weyland snickered as he held the cloth firmly, wrapping the handle. He swung a few times, and gave a satisfied look.

And then, he stuck the hammer at his waist like a dagger, saying,

"I'll speak up when Kusla's ashamed for getting the point across himself, alright~?"

"Hey."

"Ashamed?"

Irine frowned harder upon seeing Kusla's hapless self, and glared at the latter. At this moment, Kusla found himself to be in an awkward position, and that he was manipulated by Weyland. Weylan probably saw Irine's value as a blacksmith, expertise-wise, and so he wanted to use Kusla as bait to create an opportunity and have Irine open her heart. This time, the method he used was a lot gentler than when they first encountered Fenesis.

But to Kusla, if he was to put us a facade and lie to Irine, causing her imagination to run wild, things would get difficult for him. In fact, Fenesis

had a unique characteristic, one which there would be difficulties talking about. They would be taking action along with Irine in the future, and one day, they would have to explain matters to her. However, Kusla could not determine if it was an appropriate moment. Irine might have some strange thoughts or guesses before that moment arrived, so Kusla wanted to eliminate such possibilities beforehand. He took a deep breath, and said,

“She’s someone necessary for me to attain my dreams.”

“!”

Irine inadvertently retreated.

“Ah, so you’re that kind of Alchemist...”

Kusla too realized the inappropriate choice of words,

“No. This is troublesome...”

Kusla could not help but scratch his head, and Weyland then interrupted,

“Kusla had a childhood friend from his hometown when he was younger, but that childhood friend was killed by bandits, and he always wanted the power to protect the ones he loves. Because of that, he’s seeking the sword of Orichalcum. What’s next after that is to use that sword to protect the Princess~. You understand?”

Irine and Kusla looked flabbergasted as Weyland rattled on.

And then, Irine turned her head towards Kusla as gingerly as a water wheel with its teeth unhinged.

Kusla too was dumbfounded seeing how Weyland mentioned this dream even he had. *One of these days, I’m going to get one right back at you,*

Weyland! He grudgingly thought. However, he could not deny what Weyland said. Remaining calm, he said reluctantly,

“...I-in this sense, I find myself to be ridiculous too.”

“!”

Irine gasped, and Kusla had a feeling that the feisty looking hair bundled on her hair expanded.

“Th-there really is...”

She continued on, perturbedly,

“All kinds of Alchemists.”

“I won’t deny that.”

The name ‘Interest’ really is inhumane, Kusla thought bitterly. However, he definitely would not lie when the matter was regarding Magdala. This time, he lost completely to Weyland, who manipulated him. He glared at the latter, but the latter returned with a gleeful grin.

“So-so, that child...no, that person isn’t your slave or something...?”?

“Of course not. Her mistake resulted in a plating failure. That’s why we had her clean up the mess.”

“Plating? With mercury?”

“I said we have everything here, right?”

Mercury was available only in limited quantities, like cinnabar from the mountains. Many knew of the skill called plating, but they would still be fooled by metals plated gold or silver. That was because it was difficult to see the actual plated item.

Irine's eyes were glittering like a cat eyeing a bird in front of it.

"I can go help now, right?"

And upon saying that, she seemed to realize something, and adds on,

"It's really great, to be able to experiment freely."

Kusla merely shrugged at this.

Irine again carried the luggage she brought, and was about to head downstairs.

She placed her hand on the railing, and suddenly turned her head around.

"Did you drop something?"

"Something I have to say to you first."

Irine looked really displeased.

"I really want to leave this town."

And so, she descended the stairs without looking back.

Kusla and Weyland were left alone upstairs, and from their facial expressions, it appeared they understood what Irine was implying.

Irine was capable, and it was obvious comparing her, who just finished cleaning up, and Fenesis. Fenesis was completely covered in soot, appearing as though she entered a chimney. However, Irine merely got the hem of her clothes dirtied.

With fleet movements, Irine began to prepare plating again before the cleaned furnace.

Without either Kusla or Weyland's instructions, she was able to proceed with her work smoothly. Fenesis only had the knowledge of how to plate through the book she read, and could not catch up with Irine's working speed. Halfway through, she could only watch blankly.

Irine heated the mercury skilfully, and did not let it boil suddenly. She placed the gold inside the mercury, and then the main material for plating, a piece of copper. After that, the plating was done. Kusla and Weyland thought they should simply let the mercury vaporize since they were going to leave the workshop, but Irine managed to keep the mercury back properly. The method she used was distillation, the same as when they were extracting zinc. Fenesis was overwhelmingly lacking in this knowledge when compared to Irine.

The final product obtained from this plating work was such that unless someone was adept at handling metals, it would be difficult for anyone to distinguish whether it was real.

Fenesis understood the purpose of the plating, and was unable to be happy at seeing the finished product, but it was only after dinner did the others realize another reason as to why she was unhappy.

Heading to Kazan, Kusla's group had to leave this workshop, but whatever they could take away was Autris' responsibility. Thus, Autris would send in his subordinates to affirm what was inside the workshop, and record down the items. After some discussion, Kusla and Weyland chose to take along a few items they felt would not be detected if taken away, and replace them with cheap replacements. That was why they were proceeding with the plating.

After the plating was done, Irine inquired about the purpose of the plating, and Kusla brazen told her that. This plot caused Irine to frown, but her lips

showed a delighted smirk. After that plating, the trio started plotting other ideas.

How about we swap all the diamonds and gemstones for glass? Irine asked. It appeared that since she inherited the title of the blacksmith guild leader from her deceased husband, she had some grudge accumulated within her, and was intending to get one back at them.

Once they got down on how to execute it, the trio began having furious discussions, resulting in them having some nibbles of bread in front of the furnace for dinner. However, Irine's enthusiasm was certainly not simply due to her desire to exact revenge on the Knights. As a blacksmith, she had a repressed curiosity for knowledge, and this so happened to overflow in this moment.

After their discussions were basically over, Weyland suddenly asked Irine on the subject that most interested her, smelting metal. At this moment, Kusla noticed that Fenesis was no longer in front of the furnace.

He went upstairs to have a look, and found Fenesis seated by the table alone, staring listlessly at the opened massive book in front of her.

Once he ascended the stairs, she glanced aside, looking a little uninterested, before looking back at that book. Kusla heard a few flipping of pages, took a wine bottle from the cupboard, and poured it into the unglazed cup.

"You aren't going down?"

Fenesis lifted her head upon hearing Kusla's question,

"They're about to start smelting iron."

"Iron...?"

Fenesis seemed a little annoyed as she said,

"You aren't interested?"

Kusla went straight to the point, and Fenesis wanted to refute immediately, but in the end, did not say anything as she continued staring at the book in front of her. Kusla sighed; he knew that Fenesis was feigning disinterest in iron.

He looked at the table. It appeared she had dinner alone at this place.

Kusla guessed why she was doing this.

"Looks like you're scared of strangers."

The stare on the book lifted up.

It was the same when she helped clean up with Irine after the plating was done; she was stammering after Irine greeted her, faltering.

But there should be another reason as to why Fenesis was pouting away in this place.

"And there's also that, right? Irine has great skills."

Once Kusla said that, Fenesis froze.

I guessed so, Kusla could not even sigh at this.

"You came to this workshop earlier than she did, but she's more useful than you, right?"

Irine arrived, so Fenesis, dressed as a nun, put on her hood.

But even with the hood on, one could see her ears twitching.

"Imbecile. Don't mind such things., or you'll end up in a gaudy situation again."

Kusla filled the vessel with wine again, probably thirsty from having talked too much.

“If you’re always conceited or trying to gain any standing, you’ll get tunnel vision easily. Those who have a conceited mindset are the easiest to manipulate. For example, a certain nun who thinks, I’m a Holy messenger of God, and you people are alchemists that know nothing.”

“...”

“Also, if you continue to be stubborn, you’ll lose a lot of things. Right that, that is the case. That strange conceited thinkings of yours meant that you wouldn’t look at the smelting, and you’ll lose a lot of experience. Irine’s blacksmithing skills differ from the usual, and even Weyland, who know a lot about them, and learn something.”

Fenesis’ eyes slowly lowered, before finally landing on the book again.

However, her eyes clearly were not seeing anything.

“As a member of the workshop, naturally, those with much ability are much better than those with little ability, and the ones with little ability are in the way. We don’t want those companions who are unenthusiastic and cause us trouble.”

“!”

Kusla made a deliberate choice of the word, ‘companion’, one which he hardly used. It appeared to be effective.

He coolly analyzed the situation. It appeared that saying this to rattle Fenesis was somewhat decent.

“If you get it, hurry up and stand up. If you don’t, continue reading.”

With a thud, Fenesis got to her feet. Typically, Kusla would be looking down at her, but Fenesis was taller than him as he was sitting down.

He smirked as he lifted his head at her.

"But I don't know if Irine will be kinder than Weyland as a blacksmith."

"Ugh."

Fenesis looked intimidated, but she knew what she had to do.

She closed the book, and went to the bedroom, probably to change her clothes.

Kusla watched her leave, and snorted, casually flipping through the book Fenesis was reading.

"...So she was reading this?"

It was a book containing ancient myths. She probably was investigating the myth of the Golden Sheep.

There was no doubt that she was of no help in plating, so she wanted to help Kusla and the others in other ways.

"...She's working hard for the wrong purpose again?"

Kusla grumbled, *But I guess someone hardworking is better than nothing*, and had such a notion.

No matter how unscrupulous Irine was, she was once the leader of a blacksmith guild, and most importantly, a guild workshop always had a collective group of workers. Thus, she should be able to understand how to

interact with unsociable people. In any case, Fenesis would certainly get along better with Irine as a fellow female.

Kusla was being optimistic, but it seemed his judgment was wrong.

“This is the first time I’m seeing such a powerful bellow.”

She crushed the ores, washed them, filtered them, added wood, poured the coal in, lit the fire, and used the water wheel to power the bellows, injecting air in.

Irine skillfully finished this series of work, as though she had been in this workshop for years. Fenesis obeyed Kusla’s words and came downstairs, initially hoping to help Irine, but she could not do anything.

While Fenesis remained lost, the preparation work for smelting was doing, and the bellows echoed in rhythm with the water wheel, howling like the depths of Hell, inserting air into the furnace. For every breath the bellows blew, sparks fluttered in the furnace, and the golden glint on the iron began to expand.

“Back in my workshop, we need everyone available when smelting iron, and take turns to step on the bellows. This place is good. With a water wheel powering things, even a girl with not much strength won’t lose out to a man.”

Irine beamed as she said so, but nobody answered. Clearly, she was saying those words to Fenesis, but the latter merely lowered her head, remaining silent.

Kusla too could understand Fenesis’ downheartedness.

She was so feeble that while smelting, stomping on a small bellow caused her to passed out. She once had the desire to learn how to connect the water wheel to the bellow.

But despite this, without knowing how the mechanics worked, there were some minor details that were hard to grasp. Fenesis repeated this many times with tears and sweat, and finally managed to do so, so she was feeling rather delighted.

However, without anything guiding her along, Irine had a look at the appearance of the water wheel and the bellow, and was able to get the bellow going on the first try.

For Fenesis, it was disheartening.

“Ahh...”

But naturally, Irine did not know about this. She was momentarily perplexed, not knowing how to respond to Fenesis' reaction. It was Fenesis who gave Irine a nudge during the Damascus Incident.

Thus, though she was unable to communicate properly with Fenesis the first time they met, she probably felt that the mood would improve immediately, and until then, they would be able to communicate well. After thinking for a while, she seemed to be frustrated, but her attitude was as rigid as he personality, and she decided to continue with the topic first.

“And the workshop here is really clean. Ours is really dirty, and the clean up after work is really tiring.”

It appeared that Irine underwent strict training in the workshop, and was drilled in both working and cleaning up.

Thus, once the smelting was done, the cleanup after that was completed. Such thoroughness even left Weyland flabbergasted, and for Fenesis, who only managed to remember the steps recently, Irine's actions were magical.

In this situation, despite Irine telling Fenesis that the cleaning up was the most taxing part, all it did was to deject Fenesis further.

Irine showed a gaudy smile, scratched her head, and returned to work, seemingly to escape. She scooped out the slag that was floating in the furnace, and added some branches with leaves on them into the fire.

"It's really great to have all kinds of materials. I would have been scolded if I did anything other than the instructed steps in a blacksmith workshop."

Saying that, Irine spread out the eggshells and dog bones, something she wanted to try for a long time.

These items could increase the malleability of the iron, but it seemed Irine could only use coal or fresh wood in her workshop. It was a common thinking of humans to try other methods due to curiosity. Of course, Irine was trying them out for effect purpose.

"I can really try them out as I went. Looks like I'm luckier than I think."

But for Fenesis, who finally managed to learn the basics of smelting, whatever Irine was doing was 2-3 steps ahead of her.

And despite Irine saying things to Fenesis, the latter had yet to show any response.

"..."

"I think it's better to add a little more coal~"

Weyland abruptly interrupted, either because he had enough of Irine's awkward self, or that he was more adept at smelting than anybody else.

Irine frantically did as he said, and cautiously added a little more coal.

Since then, Irine would glance at Fenesis from time to time, but never talked to the latter again.

Nobody talked to Fenesis, and she stood in the corner of the room, finally looking at Irine. Her face was no longer simply rigid, anguished even, and she continued to remain by the side until midnight, when Irine smelted some coarse iron, before she teetered up the stairs. Looking at her, it was obvious that she was crushed.

The difference in ability between a young lady who just entered a workshop, and a guild leader who went through years of training, with skills forged to a point where men would recognize them, was obvious. If Fenesis however was able to adapt better and handle such interpersonal relationship, her life would be a little easier for her.

Weyland's eyes were glowing as he stared at the iron block that was still hot, appearing as though he was going to leap upon the iron block and lick it thoroughly. Irine, sweating profusely, left Weyland aside and undid the handkerchief on her head, saying to Kusla,

"Was my talk to her that bad?"

Kusla looked away from where Fenesis left, and stared at Irine, who was a little flustered.

Half her facial muscles were raised, and it was as much of a half-smile as the term would imply.

"I guess it's because you're so much better than she is."

“...You gave me a nudge, but that child...no, that person enlightened me.”

“...She said there’s luck or something, right?”

“There is luck in this world.”

Irine quipped, and sighed,

“That was really a hammer to my head. At the same time, I’m thinking that she’s really suffering in this world. I really wanted to thank her, and also talk with her...”

Once Irine said that, Kusla added lightheartedly,

“Hm? Are...you sure what you think is correct?”

“What do you mean?”

“If it’s too painful, she’s likely to avoid it. That’s her personality.”

Kusla yawned, and said,

“You’re too scary. That’s why she’s shunning you.”

Such words caused Irine to widen her eyes. Given how honest she was, it was unlikely she ever thought of this,

“Scary? Me?”

“You suddenly came into this workshop, and your skills as a blacksmith completely overwhelms hers. She probably thinks that you’re threatening her position.”

“Ah...”

Irine looked as though she stepped on a pebble, and turned her stare towards the stairs.

She curled her lips bitterly, her shoulders lowered dejectedly,

“Ah...I see..”

Through her marriage, Irine suddenly became the wife of the master ruling the town’s blacksmiths. This was basically leapfrogging several ranks amongst the blacksmiths.

Every person in the town had their own identifiable positions, a strict order. Irine did not appear to be the kind to abuse her power, but because of that, she did not understand the feeling of those whose positions were disrupted.

But despite so, after what happened with her own marriage, Irine had a thorough impression on such interactions.

She finally realized the mistake she made, and inadvertently gave a guilty look on her face.

“Then...I was showing off too much of my skills during the smelting?”

Kusla shrugged, implying that she might have.

“Ugh...I guess this is another reason why grandpa thinks of me as a child...”

Irine gave a bitter look. She probably realized that she ignored a lot of things while mesmerized in the freedom of being able to work as she pleased.

There was nothing more depressing than failure after glee.

“Ah, but since you say so, that means she’s a member here?”

As she was a member of this workshop, she was worried that her position was threatened.

Irine lifted her head, only to see Kusla tilt his neck slightly, replying,
“She said she wanted to be one of us.”

“An Alchemist?”

Irine frowned, saying this with disgust on her face, and quietly astonished. Kusla, standing in front of her, was an Alchemist, and she would be headed along with him to a Pagan town as his assistant.”

Logically, she could accept that, but emotionally, she might not.

And with that reluctant look on her face, she said,

“...Don’t you feel that you’re turning an angel into a demon?”

“It’s a complicated situation.”

Kusla was given a dubious stare from Irine, but he did not mention about Fenesis’ ears.

“But I suppose it’s a good thing that imbecile felt that you’re threatening her position. If she’s able to be more studious as a result, it’ll help us out.”

Irine looked as though she had difficulty accepting those words, but she did not refute.

“...I get the feeling that there are all kinds of people. I thought Alchemists would act more like Alchemists.”

“That really sounds like something a philosophy student would say.”

“...I’m bad at talking.”

“We are like magicians who are isolated from people, but we aren’t restrained, and we continue with our weird experiments.”

"Um, I see, I see. So there are all kinds of scenarios with Alchemists. It does feel weird, but that person there seems to be more passionate about metals than me."

Irine looked back at Weyland, saying that,

"There is only one common point between us. We pursue the Magdala in our hearts. Compared to ordinary people...no."

"?"

"Compared to eccentric people, we aren't any different in other sense."

"..."

Irine glanced aside at Kusla, seemingly accepting this explanation begrudgingly as she said, looking a little perplexed,

"Do I need a Magdala too?"

"Homeless people need to have a goal in mind, so that they won't reminiscence the past."

Irine snickered. She probably recalled her background.

"For that, I'll even kick women and children down if I have to."

"You're a vengeful person."

"Can't be a proper blacksmith if I don't do that."

Kusla shrugged, and Irine snorted, ready to put the fire out. She suddenly stopped, turned back to look at Kusla, saying,

"Ah, right. Help me put in a word to that nun, that I'm able to take a step forward thanks to her. I hope to thank her properly, and that she'll think of me as a junior."

"You aren't going to thank me?"

Hearing that, Irine curled her lips, and went towards the furnace without saying anything.

Irine did not appear to be that stubborn, and did not need to mind that much.

Kusla could not help but think, if Fenesis stopped with that strange guessing, she could be like Irine.

The next day, Kusla and the others started discussing the type of firewood used, and their arrangements based on the smelting the previous day.

There were many different combinations of ores and temperature required for smelting, based on the type of metal to be smelted. Kusla and Weyland had some basic knowledge, so they could simply concentrate on the parts they could not understand. However, Fenesis was still figuring things out by herself, and had a tough time.

Irine was concerned about Fenesis, but Kusla and Weyland were more well versed in the art of smelting than the guild blacksmiths, such that they understood at once, and she did not have to explain in detail. This resulted in Fenesis having more issues listening.

Fenesis frantically took notes on the stone tablet using a limestone pen, but it was of no use.

Knowledge was not something that could be gained just by recording on a tablet. Every piece of knowledge had to be mixed with experience, gained little by little.

Fenesis thoroughly understood that she was lacking in ability, and looked obviously dejected. Seeing her in such a state, it appeared Irine wanted to say something.

It would be more troublesome when more impurities gathered on the ore, and the same applied for a workshop; the more people there are, the more troubles there will be. Kusla casually spread some cheese on his bread, nibbling on it as he observed the situation. It was a troublesome matter, so he decided to be hands off for the time being.

The auditor Autris employed for tabulating the workshop's resources would be here the next day, so they would have to start hiding the fortunes starting from the afternoon. They were going to swap things with glass and plated metals, but Weyland remained gleeful in the process, and Irine remained worried about Fenesis, but was working enthusiastically. Fenesis was the only one who remained guilty, and she was the only one unable to do anything. In the end, she could only walk to the side and open a book.

Of course, she could choose to approach them and learn from their work, but Irine's knowledge and skills far surpassed her, and it was likely she was fearful of Irine.

Kusla remained silent on this. He told Fenesis on what the latter should do if she wanted to help in the workshop, but despite this, she remained unwilling to move forward, and Kusla was not so kind as to lend a hand to her.

While Weyland and Irine went downstairs enthusiastically, Kusla too intended to follow.

But right when he was about to head downstairs, he felt a stare, and stood at the edge of the stairs, turning back, meeting Fenesis in the eyes.

The latter frantically averted her eyes, and Kusla did not stay for long as he continued on downstairs.

However, his face remained contorted in displeasure, for he noticed Fenesis' expression.

She was like a girl, terrified to be abandoned.

Kusla got anxious, and for an instance, had the urge to drag her downstairs forcefully, only to stop.

For he felt that Fenesis had to sake her own way out.

Right when Kusla was about to reach the second basement, he stopped due to two stares at him.

"...What?"

Weyland and Irine stared at Kusla in unison.

"You're alone?"

And hearing Irine's question, Kusla coldly retorted,

"Did you see two people?"

"That's not it."

"Bring little Ul down too~."

Weyland went straight to the point.

Kusla curled his lips bitterly,

"Do I really have to worry about everything?"

"You're really bad at lying~."

Kusla gave Weyland a vexed look. He felt that he was being affected by the latter's words.

"How about you bring her out to the market?"

"Ah?"

"Buy some things. I'm sure little Ul can help out too~"

"..."

Kusla looked completely mystified, wondering why Weyland would be saying such things.

Is it because he could be alone with Irine if he chases us out? Kusla could not help but guess wildly.

Weyland then continued on,

"And in the meantime, please proceed with the preparations for the trip."

Alchemists typically had to do everything by themselves, for it was an occupation where it was hard to obtain trust from others.

However, they would have to share expenses for the trip to Kazan.

Kusla pondered through, and considered that he was not as much of an alcoholic as Weyland. If they were to bring alcohol along for the trip to Kazan, a drunk Weyland might cause some hassle. Thus, he would not prepare too much wine.

Weyland made this much concession just to get Kusla moving.

Irine would be simply concerned about Fenesis, but Weyland was most probably more interested in women than wine.

If that was not the case, he had other plans.

“Don’t hide any valuable stuff I don’t know of when I’m not around.”

If Weyland was going to hit on women, he would have to spend more.

“I won’t do such things~”

Who knows? Though he wondered, Kusla relented. If he were to obstruct Weyland, it would be troublesome when the latter gets his revenge.

Furthermore, Kusla recalled the expression of an abandoned pup Fenesis showed.

He sighed deeply again, and returned upstairs without stepping on the final step.

Let’s go shopping he shouted gruffly, and for a while, Fenesis did not realize that those words were prompting him.

Hurry up, only when he told her that did she finally lift her head from the book she was reading.

“Wh-where are we going?”

Fenesis asked as she hastily put on the nun habit, with a hood at the top that manages to cover her head completely.

“To the market.”

“Eh...but, erm, what about the work?”

“God’s teachings enlightened me.”

Kusla’s words caused Fenesis to regain some vigor, and she glared at him.

“That Weyland seem to be plotting something.”

“Hm?”

“I was chased out.”

Kusla glanced down at Fenesis, and shrugged. Hearing that reply, Fenesis was inadvertently dumbfounded.

She pondered, and after a while, walked beside Kusla with light steps. Kusla could tell from her sidelong face that she seemed to be relax. She probably had some peeving misunderstanding that caused a strange little sense of kindredness.

Are we both people with nowhere to belong to?

Kusla felt helpless as he brought Fenesis to the market.

Arriving on the streets after noon passed, he found that there were few pedestrians. It was very quiet.

“Rather quiet.”

Never had he seen her say what she needed to say so quickly, yet it was during such frivolous moments that she was able to talk immediately.

As an Alchemist, Kusla too realized that the streets were quiet. It was because he found it troublesome that he did not voice it out.

“At this time, there are many workers in town having naps.”

“Nap?”

Her words sounded a little rebuking, probably because she was used to the lifestep of living with strict discipline. Or perhaps she could no longer take naps anymore.

"They started work since dawn. Ah, right. I heard that the blacksmiths used to create clocks for naps."

"Clocks?"

"Like a clepsydra, a sundial, a mechanical one, and all kinds of them, however, such is a classic reason as to why people misunderstand, thinking that Alchemists can do everything."

"...Why?"

"That clock is made from water and powder, just like what an Alchemist would do."

"Is that not a....water...clock?"

Fenesis' green eyes were twirling as they stared at Kusla. Then, she seemed to have thought of something as she averted her eyes. The actual reason was not something Fenesis could think of, so Kusla did not wait, and revealed the answer.

"A baker has yeast. Mix that with water and wheat, put the dough on a bucket, and when the dough expands, the bucket will tilt and fall onto the floor."

"Ah."

"As for the time it'll take for fermenting, that's their speciality."

Fenesis was so impressed, she was stunned.

She quietly muttered. Back then, bakers had such amazing skills.

"This really isn't alchemy, but try learning how to use your head a little."

Fenesis gave a defiant look, but she nodded; she was probably amazed by the baker's accomplishment.

Soon, they arrived at the market. Gulbetti's standard market was large, and even Kusla, who was familiar with the capital that was of comparable size, found this place to be bustling. In the areas neighboring Gulbetti, the owner of the land, the nobles, the Church or monastery had special privileges to open markets on certain days. It was likely that Gulbetti had many people purchasing the rights to open markets from those people, and that they could open a market every day.

But to the chickens that feasted on malt and were fattened, their fates were forever decided.

There was a bronze statue of a person holding an arbiter's sword, and the flag of the Knights was set in front of this bronze statue, one which originally symbolized the autonomy this town had.

"What are we going to buy here? Any ingredients?"

"Snakes, Newts and stuff like that."

What Kusla mentioned were ingredients that any person in town would expect an Alchemist would use. Initially, Fenesis assumed that Kusla and Weyland would use such ingredients for experimenting.

Of course, at this point, Fenesis was glaring at Kusla, implying that she hoped for a proper answer. However, Kusla had a feeling that she was in a good mood, or perhaps it was just him.

"We're preparing for our trip."

"Preparing for the trip..."

"Hm?"

Fenesis looked a little grim, and Kusla could not help but ask. For some reason, she looked really motivated for this, saying,

“I will do my best.”

Do your best for what? Kusla quietly asked, but did not say it out.

Pork intestines, salted herrings, white wheat buns, a barrel of distilled grape wine, and a little of some root vegetables that would last.

“This is all, I guess?”

Kusla gave the order to the owner, and told him to deliver them to the workshop, bending his fingers to count before muttering.

The journey to Kazan would take them about 2-3 weeks, and on the way there, they would encounter little villages scattered everywhere, so Kusla made these orders while planning for them. The boss said that he wanted to account properly, but Kusla was too lazy with it as he stuffed the money to the former, who was taken aback, before showing a servile smile. It appeared he classified Kusla as one of those lavish customers. Weyland and Irine must be robbing all the valuables they could, so at this point, such expenses was merely pocket change to Kusla.

“So what’s left is a carpet or something similar?”

Kusla was about to walk away, and Fenesis suddenly spoke up,

“Please wait.”

“Hm?”

“Is this all?”

Fenesis asked, looking perturbed.

Kusla glanced at Fenesis, stared at the boss who was promptly instructing his assistants, and shrugged,

“Do you think that you can buy that much?”

“Hm?”

“I bought more than enough. We’ll be passing through some villages on the way there. Food is different from rocks. You stock up too much of them, and they’ll rot. If there isn’t enough, you can buy them later.”

Hearing Kusla’s words, Fenesis remained dumbfounded as she lifted her head at him.

And then, her eyes flickered in hesitation, before she peeked up at him again.

“This is not what I mean...”

“So what is it? You want to purchase raisins?”

Kusla teased, and for a moment, Fenesis looked really peeved, before she retracted that expression, looking uneasy.

“Erm, it is a trip, for 2 to 3 weeks, right?”

“Yes. Meat, fish, bread. I accounted for the amount for 3 meals a day. I’m guessing even nobles will be envious.”

Hearing those words, Fenesis’ face remained perturbed.

What was she trying to convey?

Kusla frowned as he looked down at Fenesis, and the latter inadvertently pulled her neck in, saying tentatively,

"Erm, what about onions, and garlic?"

"Huh?"

"And...if there is salt and oil, they should be able to last longer."

However, she continued on without confidence.

Kusla did not understand the meaning behind those words. Onions? Garlic?

"It will be good if we can buy some medicine, and even better if there is a map. You have been using coins for money, right? It will...be very convenient...to have currency from that area."

Saying that, Fenesis' voice trailed off, before vanishing completely at the end.

However, she looked at Kusla with adamant eyes.

Typically, whenever Fenesis' voice trailed off, it would be when that little courage of hers vanished.

But at this point, Fenesis was different from before.

She added on.

"Have you not prepared for a trip before?"

You do not know anything, do you?

"I did go on trips and such."

Especially for Kusla, an Alchemist who was classified by his superiors as one with filthy limbs, he was often assigned to various places as punishment.

Kusla suddenly realized.

Preparing for a trip.

He never did so once. Back then, the Knights arranged everything whenever he went to a place, and all he needed to do was to sit in the carriage, read a book, and go out to eat.

On the other hand, Fenesis leaved the life of a refugee, chased out of her residences.

Kusla found himself to be a fool for actually replying instinctively that he made trips before. It was like Fenesis who instinctively said, "I know about the myth of the Golden Sheep".

In fact, Kusla never did prepare for his own trips before. In any case, all he said were foolish words for the sake of his own pride.

"..."

Kusla did not dare to look at Fenesis in the eyes, and the boss watched them, seemingly wanting if there was something. Kusla ignored that stare, and took a deep breath.

He could not let himself be all defensive about this.

He never expect that he would have to say such words to himself one day.

"And then?"

"Hm?"

"Onions and garlic?"

Hearing Kusla's response, Fenesis was inadvertently surprised.

Kusla immediately understood the reason for her shock, and could not help but feel infuriated.

“Do you think I’ll continue to put up a front like you?”

“!”

“I never prepared for a trip before. To be honest, I don’t know about traveling. Isn’t preparing for a trip no different from trying to live a normal life for as long as possible?”

Kusla gruffly continued, and Fenesis seemed to be in disbelief, for it took her a little while to accept Kusla’s words.

She abruptly straighten her waist, lifting her petite chest, and looked gleeful as she nodded.

“Smoked meat last longer than salted ones, and jerky last longer than that. For bread, rye bread that is baked twice will last longer than wheat bread.”

“Rye...black bread?”

Kusla often ate such things in the past, but since they could purchase wheat bread, there was no reason to eat rye bread.

Fenesis saw the look of disgust on Kusla’s face, and immediately chided him.

“We should focus more on how long the food can be preserved, rather than the taste. We need to consider that while the trip was originally planned for 2 to 3 weeks, there may be a chance of it lasting for a month, or a month and a half.”

“...”

Impossible. Kusla suddenly had such a thought, but he suddenly recalled that the rivers were unexpectedly flooded by rain, resulting in the Azami’s

Crest delayed. They probably never considered such scenarios at all when planning.

Kusla was an Alchemist raised in the situation. He started to seriously ponder the words he often said in a self-deprecating manner.

Thus, he did not refute, and as Fenesis said, he ordered rye bread that was twice baked and dried. Rye bread was a lot better than the oat bread Weyland often ate for dinner, but Kusla often capitalized on his position as an Alchemist, and was too used to a luxurious lifestyle, so he had a bias against rye bread.

“What next? If we need onions and garlic, we’ll need vinegar and mustard, right?”

“Flavor and aroma is not going to be of use. If there is rain in the middle of the trip, most of the food will rot, and be unusable. Purchasing onions and garlic are for this purpose. They can last until the very end.”

“...What about oil and salt?”

“Salt and water alone can last us for a week. With oil, a torn fur skin can be waterproof, and there is valuable use for it when it rains. Of course, oil is nutritious enough to be drank, can be used for treating wounds, lighting, or burning.”

Delicious dishes, delicious wine.

Kusla and Weyland were only thinking of such things, but Fenesis was talking about such ominous mattes.

“That is insufficient. If you still have some money, buy some more. There may be situations where you cannot buy ingredients in the villages.”

“...In any case, it’s a Knights escort.”

Kusla said, and Fenesis looked dumbfounded as she stared at him.

"I am not saying that the villagers will not sell to us. Some villages will be abandoned because of bandits, and some would be empty. Or there may be plagues running rampant, rendering a village destitute. If there are two armies fighting nearby, it is best to consider the possibility of enemy armies poisoning the water in the wells. Thus, you need to bring a lot of water. If possible, I hope you bring some weak wines that last longer than water. Also, if possible, some medicine too. We do not know when we will be hurt; medicine may be more valuable than money at certain times, and can be exchanged for many things. Also—"

Fenesis rattled on. The reason she answered that she would be working hard when she heard that they were preparing for a trip, was because she knew how tiresome preparing for a trip would be.

Furthermore, everything Fenesis mentioned was reasonable. Thus, Kusla bought everything she mentioned.

Everything she mentioned was all for the sake of living on, and based on life experiences. Kusla had no intention to interrupt.

It seemed that before she was taken in by the Knights, she did not survive on luck alone.

"Also, we need garments for the cold."

"Ah? Sure."

Fenesis continued on fluently, and for the first time, her face looked so excited, rendering Kusla mesmerized.



He recovered, and found Fenesis glaring at him furiously.

“Are you listening to me?”

He never thought he would be told off by her like this.

“We are headed North, no? If you have money, please purchase some of this too.”

“Yes, yes.”

After purchasing their food supplies again, Kusla and Fenesis head off to the place where wool and leather goods were produced.

“If you find them to be a hassle, you can burn them or sell them. If you feel hot, you can take them off, but we have no choice but to wear them when it is really cold.”

“Boss, pick out a few for us.”

Kusla said, and was rewarded with a large pile of woolwear.

“What else is left.”

“I feel more confident if there is a map.”

“We don’t need that now...we are going with the military, right?”

“Those that said that they will not be stranded as long as they follow the group never experienced being scattered due to storms or landslides. Once they scatter, it is basically impossible for people to meet up again. Only the people at the front would have a map.”

“You are talking about the mountain path. We are probably going by the fields—”

"And if we head there on horse, there is a chance the horses will gallop astray. It is common for horses to go wild and ferry people to some rural place. You have yet to ride on one before, have you not?"

"..."

At this moment, Kusla was painfully aware of how his knowledge was limited only to the workshop.

"Also, it is for the best if you prepare at least two kinds of currency. Some currencies cannot be used in warring areas."

"I can imagine that. We can't use coins with the head image of the enemy leader during wars, right?"

"There is no need to worry about such if it is gold and silver, but typically, exchanging currencies will be troublesome..."

Kusla understood this much too, at least.

"Because there is the issue of purity, right?"

"Yes. And also, it is common to encounter counterfeits."

Fenesis said with a stiff tone.

It seemed she only mentioned this because of the rationale, and not that she was still fuming over the plating.

"But most can be seen through easily."

"Eh, is that so?"

Fenesis was shocked, and Kusla lifted his head. *Now I have some pride to salvage*, Kusla quietly thought, and at the same time, felt disgusted with himself for having such thoughts.

"We just need to scratch the surface hard with something. If it is plated, the surface will fall off. If it is pyrite, or what they call fool's gold, there will be sparks. If someone tries to dupe us with brass by calling it gold, I just need to smell it. Brass gives off a unique smell. If there are cheaper metals mixed in, put it on a scale, measure it against standard gold or silver, and put it in water to compare the density. No matter the size of the metals, their individual weights are different."

"...Will your substitution not be discovered?"

Kusla merely shrugged at that.

"We just need to be confident and say that they are looking for trouble. If they still want us to return the goods, we will just hand over the plated things to them again. There aren't many people who will do another check or so again."

"..."

Fenesis' mouth was half opened, and she stared at Kusla wordlessly.

"It appears that your manner of living differs from mine."

Kusla joked.

"Now then, are we going to swap currencies?"

"Ah, yes."

"I think it's useless, but better to be safe."

"That is correct."

Fenesis nodded with a tense face.

Kusla looked back at her with a stoic face, and sighed.

“Anyway, let’s go.”

“Erm, to where?”

Fenesis saw where Kusla was headed to, and stopped in her tracks.

“If you are exchanging money, there is one nearby...”

“Well, we’re headed to the bridge.”

‘Hm?’

There were money changers in the market, but in a large town, many money changers would work together with craftsmen who processed gold or silver. Thus, Fenesis felt a little skeptical, but did not ask too much as she followed Kusla to the bridge. Noon break ended, and the blacksmiths and merchants began work, resulting in the bridge being bustling again.

Kusla found one money changer, and asked a question. Fenesis beside him inadvertently showed a skeptical face. However, the money changer looked at Fenesis and Kusla back and forth, and with a smile, pointed at another blacksmith selling on the bridge. That blacksmith had a straw mat laid out, a work desk on it, and was working his hammer and chisel diligently.

He had several items placed on his desk, either to attract customers or to boast his skills, and they were all intricate masterpieces. Craftsmen often dealt with gold and silver, so they were one of the few people that Alchemists could get along with.

“This?”

This craftsman with some white hair received an item from Kusla, raised it over his head towards the sun, and asked.

The green light shone upon the man’s tanned face.

"Yes...do you mind making something that can be put around the neck?"

"Understood. And the decoration? This alone is a fine gemstone. It'll be ruined with the rich colored gold."

"Silver, please. And if possible, as soon as possible."

Kusla said, and placed a lot of gold coins heartily. The craftsman however did not smile as brightly as the merchant was, looking reluctant instead.

In certain ways, they were just like Alchemists.

"Anyway, I'll try my best to finish this in a few days."

Saying that, he nonchalantly stuffed the emerald, which Kusla had been hiding in his clothes the entire time, into the tool box.

Perhaps that was proof that he normally dealt with fine materials.

"Thank you."

Kusla said, and stood up.

He turned his head towards Fenesis beside him, and saw that she was staring at him with a stunned look for some reason.

"What?"

"...Y-you?"

"Hm?"

Some nice instincts, Kusla thought, but he immediately noticed that Fenesis misunderstood.

"I'm different from Weyland."

Hearing that, Fenesis appeared to have vaguely understood. It was vexing, but someone lecherous like Weyland would certainly cause trouble one day.

“But why did you do that?”

“Use your eyes a bit, and observe what you can see.”

Kusla said, and tapped his finger at the ornament on his ears.”

“As you said, better safe than sorry.”

Fenesis blinked her eyes, asking,

“As I said?”

“I don’t know when I’ll be chased out of the workshop, wandering around. Of course, I have to consider such possibilities as well, but wandering around seem to be tougher than I imagine. So I’m thinking that I should swap out what’s valuable on me into something that can be exchanged for money easily.”

“...”

Fenesis looked dumbfounded, and Kusla had no choice but to switch to a simpler way of explaining matters.

“Thanks to you, I learned quite a bit, I’ll say.”

“!”

Fenesis’ ears jolted such that even the hood was nearly knocked off.

Kusla had the urge to hold them down, but Fenesis did so before that. That action appeared to one where she had to suppress her delight and riveted shock that she was able to contribute.

But she suddenly arched her back, took a deep breath, and said,

"I-I do not believe your words."

She was being gleeful due to praise, but it was a lot livelier than when she was in the workshop.

Since it was rare of her to be praised by others, he let her continue on.

Kusla inadvertently had the increasing urge to tease her again.

"But why is it that you're able to handle the trip preparations so well, yet so awkward in the workshop?"

"!"

Fenesis scowled, but it appeared her endurance of criticism was stronger.

"I-I was always wandering around, but I was never working in a workshop before."

She was right, and Kusla had to admit that.

"I'm the opposite."

Kusla simply admitted his fault, and Fenesis realized that what Kusla said was merely to tease her. She bit her lips hard, rubbing her tender cheeks.

Kusla glanced aside at her, and said impatiently,

"After a while, you can do this well in the workshop. There's no need for you to worry so much about IRine."

"!"

Fenesis' face remained frozen. She was stunned.

"Even I have things I don't know, but I'll admit my lack of knowledge, and I have the courage to learn."

Saying that, he gave Fenesis a smile.

Of course, Fenesis was not a fool who did not understand. However, her immature mindset, similar to her appearance, obstructed her thinking.

"You're dull-witted, but there are times where you can help, like preparing for trips. You have the ability to learn, and you're passionate. Of course I hope that you'll improve, even if it's little by little."

Saying this through, Fenesis turned her face away, seemingly unable to bear this anymore.

She seemed to be suffering, from what her sidelong face showed.

Kusla's gentle words were always traps, and even if they were, Fenesis would feel really fired up for unknown reasons if she was to accept them. However, Kusla's words should probably reach her, and she could understand...perhaps.

Such a simple person. He muttered quietly.

However, it was because she often showed such an obvious reaction that he wanted to stay by her side.

"I wanted to cheer you up, you know?"

"I-I said that I will not believe in your words."

Her face was flushed red, as though she was working in front of the burning furnace. She walked forth with large strides, leading Kusla by two steps.

But right when she was able to take the third step, she suddenly stood still.

And as Kusla caught up to her, she suddenly said,

“...But...”

“Hm?”

Kusla looked over his shoulders towards her, and saw her lower her head, saying,

“Fo-for future preparations, p-please teach me plating. An-and...how to...validate them...”

Fenesis lifted her head, seemingly glaring at Kusla, probably to motivate herself.

“...I-if I know what a con artist would do, I can see through them.”

Be honest if you do not know, do what you can do with your earnest desire. Though that alone would not be enough for her to become an Alchemist, after seeing Kusla simply admit that he did not know, Fenesis was mentally prepared to overcome that hurdle.

At this point, Kusla could not help but think that though it was obvious, she had to take the hard way before understanding. In any case, since she was able to stand on her feet again, it did not matter.

“Let’s hurry back to the workshop then. Irine’s probably almost done with all the plating.”

“Yes.”

Fenesis’ reply was filled with rigor, as though she was stepping onto a battlefield. Kusla was dumbfounded, and showed her a smile.

Fenesis’ body remained as rigid as before, but she was soon able to converse with Irine normally. Despite Irine’s work, she remained at the back, not

moving away. However, she was not trying hard to learn, but asking Irine questions diligently. It appeared that Irine too was concerned about Fenesis, asking Fenesis if there was any question in every step she made. This situation seemed decent.

After plating and polishing the glass to appear like diamond, Fenesis was working side by side with Irine, and more than that. By dinner, they were already like sisters, looking delighted as they sat side by side, eating. As Kusla deduced, Irine was adept at interacting with people, and once Fenesis decided to her, her enthusiasm alone was an eye-opener, and that intrigued Irine further.

With one issue in the workshop, Kusla could finally heave a sigh of relief, but at the same time, he found it boring. Weyland called Kusla to go to the market with Fenesis, for he anticipated such a development.

Fenesis was more experienced in preparing for the trip. If she could help, she would gain confidence; and with confidence, she could take a step forward.

Kusla and the group were having vegetables and steamed pike, and they added a special wine to eliminate the stench. Weyland was happily chirping to Irine and Fenesis opposite the table.

Like usual, as long as there were women, Weyland would be interested. However, Kusla had to admit that perhaps there was a reason as to why he was so popular with women.

“But Alchemists are really extravagant. Do you always have dishes like this every day?”

“Like this?”

Irine asked with some surprise, and Kusla could not help but ask back. Irine had a look at the dishes on the table, and shrugged.

“This is just the necessary amount, no?”

“Chuck beef with poppy seeds all over it, steamed peak with vegetables, onion soup with enough salt, and wheat bread...eating so much good food can lead to gout.”

It was said that the reason why so many nobles were afflicted with gout was due their luxurious food. However, Kusla stabbed a knife into the chuck beef, chuckling,

“We’re welcoming a new partner in our workshop.”

Irine looked really displeased, *well, it is just as he says*, but she was probably showing such a face because of what she was thinking.

Even if she decided to come to a workshop, as a blacksmith, she had conflicted feelings about alchemists.

“It’s true that little Ul doesn’t eat meat at all~”

“Eh?”

“On the other hand, Kusla is the type who insists on having meat for meals all the time. As for me, I’m fine with fish, so it’s not going to be as luxurious as this is.”

Weyland explained, and Irine looked back and forth between Fenesis and Kusla.

“Leaving aside eating meat, I feel that spluging is not right.”

Fenesis seized upon the opportunity to state the usual formal lines.

"For example, Miss Irine."

Kusla teased, and at this moment, Fenesis noticed that the bread on Irine's plate was filled with meat. Young and strong, this gruff blacksmith who indulged in physical labor obviously preferred meat to fish.

Fenesis realized that her words were reproaching Irine, and inadvertently felt awkward. While Irine remained skeptical about what she should do, Weyland spoke up.

"How about we think of this dinner as a welcoming party~? Anyway, once we head off to Kazan, we won't have the chance to have such delicacies now."

Weyland lenta hand, and Fenesis, feeling awkward, nodded lightly, and gave Kusla a reproaching glare.

"Yes. But you are too indulgent in excesses."

"Yep. what little Ul said is correct."

Weyland expressed agreement, and that delighted Ul. She probably felt delighted that she was finally able to get one back at Kusla, who had been teasing all all this while.

She exchanged looks with Weyland, giggled, and looked gleeful, looking really proud as she went back to eating. Kusla really had the urge to ask, *you were so terrified of Irine just a moment ago. What happened to all that apprehension?*

But Kusla's image of poise would be affected if he was to be angry at this, so he ignored her and gnawed at the meat.

Irine watched the conversation between them, and said,

"I do feel a little uneasy."

"Hm?"

Kusla lifted his head, while Fenesis and Weyland looked at Irine."

"I haven't had such a meal in a while."

Luxury, you mean? Kusla nearly blurted out this sarcastic remark, before swallowing it whole along with the meat in his mouth. Fenesis looked delighted seeing Irine like this, but she appeared to be on the verge of tears.

Even Kusla knew not to hurt Fenesis at this point.

He could certainly imagine the instances of Fenesis having a meal at a table with everyone to be so rare. Leaving aside the moments when Weyland doted on her, even during the times when she was peeved after another of Kusla's pranks, Fenesis looked reluctant whenever a meal was finished, and they had to leave their seats.

Thus, Kusla ate his meal obedient, not saying another word.

Kusla was not anxious about getting one back at Fenesis, who followed Weyland's lead and was being gleeful there. After dinner, he was going to teach Fenesis how to distinguish counterfeit metals through weights.

In fact, once dinner was over, Fenesis cleared the utensils, and once they could finally start with work, Kusla nearly leered at her. While she did good in getting one over Kusla, the backlash she would suffer next would be worse.

However, it would not be interesting if he was to tease her while she was still being stubborn, and so Kusla never teased her when he was teaching her. Whenever she made a mistake or inquired on how to execute the step again, Kusla would explain again to her earnestly and carefully.

Until the very end, Fenesis was perplexed by Kusla's kindness, but naturally, Kusla was doing this as he enjoyed how she was.

One had to wonder if Fenesis realized this notion from Kusla, for when she was done clearing the items, she pouted at him, saying,

"...You are being mischievous again."

Though she was looking peeved again, there was no antagonistic feel from her.

Later, Fenesis was reading her book, sharing a candle with Kusla, who was flipping through his manuscripts. In the past, whenever she was teased by Kusla, she would head to the furnace room downstairs and stay with Weyland.

At this point, she was reading the book with the myth of the Golden Sheep. She looked really motivated, wanting to investigate properly through her own abilities. Kusla did not say much about this passion. *If she wants to be stubborn, she can be stubborn all she wants.* That would be what he would say if he wanted to.

"Didn't expect you to live this long given how defenseless you are."

Kusla could not help but mutter, and at this moment, Fenesis was sprawled on the opened book, sleeping sweetly in a gaudy position. Given the large size of the old book, she appeared to be practically devoured by the book.

Various events happened on this day, and she was probably tired.

Kusla thought as he reached his hand out to shake her shoulders. It would be bad if she was to sleep and catch a cold as a result.

"Hey, wake up."

However, Fenesis merely frowned and turned her face aside. Kusla then saw the beast ears under her hood twitching in satisfaction.

Seeing her like this, for an instance, Kusla wondered if he should tease her by dripping wax on her face like he did with his peers at the workshop where he served his apprenticeship. Certainly, she would be startled, and Kusla inadvertently broke a grin thinking about it. However, just imagining it alone was enough satisfaction for him, especially after seeing her completely defenseless face.

Offence would be the best defence, but a total lack of defence would make one agonize over attack.

Kusla sighed in a vague daze, either at Fenesis, or at himself. He went behind her, lifted her by her shoulders, and with an arm over the back of her shoulders, reached the other arm to her thighs, before lifting her lifeless body.

He assumed she would be flustered when he carried her, but she merely shrank back due to itchiness, and showed no intention in waking up. Her slender neck leaned upon Kusla's chest, unable to support her head as it turned around. Kusla inadvertently wondered if it was fine given how disoriented she was. However, he recalled back when Fenesis first arrived at the workshop, that even when he called her out of bed, she chose to shiver and shrivel to sleep in a corner of the room.

Given her usual disposition, she's probably fine. He thought. She even tagged along with Weyland at the dinner table to tell off Kusla.

In fact, till this point, neither Kusla nor Weyland did anything to Fenesis. However, Kusa did not know when there would be malice creeping into an alchemist's workshop.

Be more reliable. Kusla quietly thought. She remained in Kusla's clutches, writhing about as she let out a light moan, and then let out a sigh, probably having found her sweet spot. Kusla carried her, subconsciously realizing his face grimacing.

My name is 'Interest (Kusla)'.

Kusla was certain that Fenesis owed him some gratitude, and wanted to protect her, so he took her in. However, he felt that his imagination differed slightly from reality. He felt that his decisiveness as an alchemist was being corroded.

The issue here would be the uneasy feeling he felt.

"..."

His imagination ran wild as he pondered over it, and he sensed that he was lost in a labyrinth of chaos.

This would be the time of the Devil, when even priests would sleep.

And thus, Kusla quickly carried Fenesis to the bedroom without a second thought, and laid her on the table. Irine was sleeping downstairs, for she was experimenting along with Weyland, so Fenesis said that she wanted to do the same. However, Kusla was not so kind as to grant that.

Kusla saw Fenesis sleeping soundly however, and was certain of a fact.

Once Fenesis fell asleep, it was hard for her to wake up.

Furthermore, she was so soft, so flaky, that it was warm to embrace her.

The next day, the inspector Autris deployed came to the workshop as expected, but it appeared the substitution was not discovered.

Kusla's group were registered amongst the forces headed to Kusla, and rather than the inspector not noticing anything at all, it appeared he did not want to get involved with them, for if he did, it would be to do so with the Azami's Crest. Thus, the inspector ignored it.

This was the decision made after weighing between the prospects of a workshop under their charge being robbed, and the attrition caused by an internal conflict of power amongst the Knights.

In any case, the inspection ended smoothly, and once the inspector left, Weyland and Irine quickly got ready to burn coal. As the saying went, they treasured every single minute, and were hard at work.

“What are we still burning now?”

“We need tar.”

“That's something to be used for our trip. It's not something hard to obtain.”

Irine and Weyland were stacking wood enthusiastically, like children who just learned how to pull off pranks. Kusla was a little speechless as he watched them, and Fenesis remained tentative, but she went to Kusla's side, and was a step closer than before.

“What is...tar?”

“It's a fluid obtained by steaming wood and charring it. Just think of it as burned tree juice.”

“Huh.”

“This thing has many uses. Apply on wood, and it's waterproof; apply on the skin, it can be used as medicine, and when mixed with wine before applying onto meat, there'll be added flavor.”

Fenesis shot Kusla a look of utter disbelief, and before he could say anything, she said,

“I shall investigate on my own.”

“Oho. Good attitude.”

Kusla praised Fenesis, who took two steps away from him as she was taken for a fool again. However, the sidelong face of hers appeared a little delighted as she turned around.

Irine arranged some wood in the furnace, and lined bricks on it. She was covered in coal as she appeared again, and right when she was going to light the fire.

Knocking could be heard from the door.

The quartet exchanged looks, and Kusla was the first to head upstairs.

They were not too wary, but there was a code unique to the Knights in the knocking.

“You again?”

Kusla said as he opened the door, and the mountain tribe book stared back in defiance. *It's not my responsibility to receive such complaints*, he was implicitly stating.

“A summon.”

“What is it this time?”

“I don't know. But—”

Just Weyland alone?

Kusla retorted, and the boy merely nodded.

"Master Autris said that it's urgent."

It was a summon by Autris. Was he infuriated after hearing the inspector's report?

But if that was the case, it would be inexplicable as to why Weyland alone was summoned. If it was about the workshop alone, there was no way Weyland would be the only one summoned, and even Kusla would have to go.

"Well, since I'm summoned, I'll go~"

Weyland poked his head from downstairs, and trudged out.

"Pay attention to the steam temperature~"

Weyland left those words to Irine, before he proceeded to leave.

"What's going on?"

Faced with Irine's question, all Kusla could do was shrug."

"I can't be knowing everything about whatever that guy does outside the workshop."

"Hmm...well, whatever. Time to light the fire."

"It's like you're ill or something."

Hearing Kusla's words, Irine returned a smile.

Fenesis watched their conversation, and seemed to have learned something as she nodded away.

Then, the trio proceeded with their own matters to spend the time. After a long while, Weyland finally returned.

He entered, and said,

"Someone proposed marriage to me. I might not be able to head to Kazan now~"

Fenesis was revising on how to identify counterfeit metals through a scale balance and a bottle. Irine arrived upstairs, soaking in sweat, and Kusla was researching on how to extract gold. Once Weyland said that, he was met with stunned looks in unison.

Act 3

Kusla was confident that he was able to remain calm in most situations. Despite his lover being murdered when he went out and indulged himself in wine, he was able to maintain a calm facade.

However, there was a limit to his composure.

Amongst the trio, the first to speak up was Fenesis.

“Congrat...ulations?”

The sentence became a question at the very end, and certainly, it was a line typical of Fenesis to say.

“Hey, enough with the jokes already. You’re getting married? To whom?”

Kusla was not implying that a fool would fall in love with Weyland. They were alchemists, and alchemists typically would not marry.

“She’s a noble Princess~”

Kusla did not panic once he saw Weyland answer no nonchalantly, and instead, he calmed down.

“...What’s going on?”

Kusla asked, and a vague smile appeared on Weyland’s face. He sighed lightly, and returned to the chair beside him.

“She originally said she had some gemstones with her, and invited me over to prospect...”

“So you ended up casting aside those gemstones and fell in love with her?”

Kusla was flabbergasted as he said this, and Weyland shrugged.

"She's the one who proposed"

Seeing the undaunted look, Kusla inadvertently felt a migraine.

"Know your limits. I guess since she doesn't have an eye for men however, just got to say that she's delusional."

"That's too much~"

Kusla assumed that by humoring Weyland, the latter would continue to joke as before. However, once Weyland said that, he slowly bent down.

"You're right. But she's a smart one. She went to voice her complaints to Autris."

"...Autris?"

"Right. Alchemists can't marry, and she's a noble, which makes it even more impossible. Things got simple then. Just say that I'm not an alchemist."

"What?"

Weyland straightened himself, and spread his arms wide as though he had given up.

"That Princess said that I'm not an alchemist."

"But,"

Aren't we alchemists? While Kusla was about to answer with a rhetoric, he realized..

He recalled the heinous stare from Autris back then.

And Weyland looked perturbed.

"Hm, but even if they say that they want me to prove myself as an alchemist, I can't do or say anything here, and it's troublesome. Furthermore, the blacksmith guild seems to have an unanimous decision in deciding that I'm a blacksmith~."

Weyland's stare was then directed at Irine.

Irine was flabbergasted as she heard the sudden news, and finally reacted.

"En-enough with those foolish words. How can our people possibility accept you?"

"No, that'll depend on the situation, doesn't it~"

"What do you mean?"

While Irine asked again, Kusla said,

"Autris probably told those useless people of yours that Weyland is a blacksmith, and got them to recognize him as the guild leader or something."

"Your guess is right. Think about it. I remember there's a few foolish ones who discussed the matter of Damascus Steel with Kusla back then, right?"

After hearing Kusla and Weyland talk, Irine frowned hard, and lowered her shoulders in dejection.

"It's painful imagining that again..."

"On the bright side, you can think about how you're going to leave this town, right?"

"...I don't want to be consoled by you now."

Kusla shrugged, and looked at Weyland.

“But you can just ignore these words then, right?”

Weyland gave a frivolous look as he sat on the chair, and at the same time, looked so frivolous.

This in turn caused Kusla to be skeptical. What was he being serious about?

“Things aren’t that simple here. We pulled a fast one on Autris in the Damascus Steel matter, and he has a grudge against us. He requested the Azami’s Crest to strike my name off the list of people headed to Kazan as I’m supposedly not an alchemist.”

Autris came to this town with the intention of leasing two young alchemists, but Kusla’s group managed to con their way past them, and escaped from his management. To him, it was no different from a slap in the face.

As payback, he seized the opportunity to restrain these two alchemists in this town, even if it was Weyland himself. Kusla too could understand this method.

“What did those people at the Azami’s Crest say?”

Weyland chuckled,

“Just as what that bastard Autris said, prove myself as an alchemist. In other words, they want me to send him a sword of Damascus Steel.”

But if they were to oblige this time, the Damascus Steel would gradually be mass produced, and the chances of it being exposed as a counterfeit would increase greatly. The worst case scenario would be the Archduke having them assassinated to preserve the value of the sword in his hands.

Weyland probably realized that too, and thus, never showed any intent to replicate it again.

"Then how are you going to prove that you're an alchemist?"

"You should have seen Autris' expression when he said that~"

Surely he knew it was impossible, and thus he posed this difficult trial.

There was no way to actually prove who a person was.

Thus, there was something called a letter of introduction. An experienced blacksmith would dance something only a blacksmith would know, and people needed such things to prove their identity. Despite this, without a person with some authority or an organization recognizing this, nobody in town would affirm this person's identity.

And the Knights, who originally affirmed Weyland as an alchemist, insisted that Weyland prove himself as an alchemist.

"He snickered and told me, how about you revive the dead? What was he saying, goodness~"

"...I see."

Weyland let out a heavy sigh, and muttered,

"And..."

"Hm?"

"No...I never thought that Missy would be so interested in me."

Saying that, Weyland stood up, and tumbled down the stairs.

"H-hey."

"Let me have some time to myself."

A weak voice could be heard from downstairs.

The remaining trio was stunned, unable to say anything, and Kusla was the first to speak up again.

“Imbecile.”

That was all he said.

“Ah, erm.”

Fenesis spoke up, seemingly released from the bind of a curse.

“If-if Weyland remains like this, will he?”

Well, yeah, he won’t be able to go to Kazan. He’ll probably live a happy life in this town.”

Fenesis looked back and forth between Kusla and the stairs, and said,

“B-but Weyland wanted to go to Kazan so much.”

“Maybe. But he’s the one who did something stupid, and resulted in all this. Didn’t you hear him? No, I don’t think it’s a stupid thing. It’s marriage. Congratulations to him.”

Fenesis kept quiet, her eyes teary as she glared at Kusla.

“How cold of you. Aren’t you two colleagues?”

Irine folded her arms in front of her chest, her eyes narrowed at Kusla.

Kusla endured the stares of the two ladies, and was a little speechless as he cocked an eyebrow.

“Weyland never asked me for help.”

“...Well, if he told me that he wanted to make Damascus Steel, I’ll be conflicted too...but this means that you won’t help him?”

"Yes, but for a different reason."

Irine was surprised by Kusla's reply, and Fenesis kept staring at the stairs, expressing her concern for Weyland in her own sense.

This is troublesome, Kusla scratched his head, and explained,

"He said that she's nobility of the town, didn't he? A Princess, basically? And Autris too pulling the strings? These two are plotting to keep Weyland in town. Do you know what it means to oppose this? It'll be equivalent to opposing the rulers of this town."

"Ah."

"And then, the Azami's Crest forces will be heading North. This town Gulbetty will become an important stop between Kazan and the Southern towns. Those men of the Azami's Crest don't have the guts to overrule the people with power here, and they'll continue moving North. We forced ourselves into the list by bribing them with Damascus Steel. We're already having issues, and if more occur, they won't go out of the way to protect us."

Kusla sighed, and continued,

"Of course, that Autris should understand this well. If we do anything to help Weyland, he's likely to start up a ruckus. What will the Azami's Crest do? They'll definitely abandon us. They'll say 'we can't get in the way of Gulbetty'. And when that happens, what do we do? It'll be difficult right? At this point, we don't belong to this town anymore."

Kusla deliberately posed this difficult question, and Fenesis immediately shrank back.

Irine was already on bad terms with the blacksmiths, and it was because she decided to pursue something she loved that she chose to leave with Kusla's group.

"So Weyland has to deal with his own problem. Don't get involved. If you do, we'll lose out."

Saying those words, Kusla went back to reading the book on extracting gold.

In this world, not being able to analyze the situation would cause one to sink beyond redemption, but analyzing the mistake will also cause one to fall into Hell. Kusla too never expected Weyland to be entangled this way. The latter should have known that fooling around like this would cause troubles, let alone a Princess.

He reaped what he sowed, and Kusla had no reason to help him. Furthermore, doing so would drag him down, which was another reason not to.

Besides, Weyland was not at a dead end. He had his own way of getting out of this.

In this awkward silence, Fenesis and Irine were anxiously fretting over whether they should head downstairs. At this moment, Weyland took his pitifully little bit of luggage up, and intended to walk out of the workshop.

Speaking up this time was Fenesis,

"Erm, where, are you going?"

Weyland gave a listless smile, and said,

"Hm...well, talk it out."

In the end, he simply needed to break ties with that woman. That was all he could do.

All the developments had been logical.

Kusla practically could not be bothered to look at Weyland.

Fenesis and Irine watched him leave, and the workshop went quiet.

Both of them probably felt that Kusla's explanation was illogical. Unable to accept this, they slowly went back to their work.

Kusla snorted softly.

There were no problems at all.

Weyland left the workshop, and never returned. The next morning, a soldier sent by the Azami's Crest visited the workshop. The vanguard forces had arrived, so they were going to put their luggage into the empty carriage.

As the term implied, the vanguard were the ones who will reach the destination first. It seemed the commander did arrange for them to be part of the vanguard. If they were moving along with the rest who were first in moving to the town, the chances of them encountering pagan knowledge in Kazan would increase.

Of course, the Herald probably did so out of political concern, to lend a favor to Kusla and gain back collateral later on.

With this matter happening to Weyland, Kusla felt that it was a huge favor that the Herald would still make such arrangements.

It was a common tactic of them to give others an annoyingly large favor.

"There's really a lot of items. How are we going to move them to the carriage?"

"We sent a wagon. First, we'll bring it to the workshop. Anything valuable, don't put them on the wagon. Or else we may have to tell you that we lost them."

"Sorry to trouble you."

Kusla originally assumed that the soldier would use this opportunity to ask for a bribe, but it appeared the Azami's Crest forces were very disciplined. Other than those wearing chestplates and helmets like this soldiers, the others might be no different from bandits.

"Also, when you are done moving the luggage, please come to the inn. The Herald's calling for you."

Kusla instructed Fenesis and Irine.

It seemed they waited for Weyland till the middle of the previous night, and they were sleepy.

Kusla could only sigh. After seeing them move the luggage out, Kusla and the rest went over to where the Herald Alzen was.

He intended to go alone, but Fenesis and Irine insisted on going along too.

They probably wanted to listen in on Weyland's situation. However, there was already a conclusion to this.

Kusla already knew that this was what Alzen wanted to discuss.

And thus, he showed no shock at all.

"Do anything to a Princess, and we're lucky not to get the noose."

Of course, they had no say to refute that line.

"But Weyland was once part of us here. If he gets people discussing, it'll affect our honor. Anyway, we'll have to ask His Highness for his opinion."

Fenesis lifted her head, as though she saw a light of salvation, however, Alzen harshly notified them,

"However, my responsibility here is to settle every issue the corps have. Do understand the consequences if you do anything that obstructs our movements."

"Of course."

Kusla replied with a grim look, and Fenesis lowered her head weakly.

"Our main forces will arrive tomorrow, or two days later, and we'll begin to head North. Be obedient, and don't get into trouble."

Kusla bowed politely, prompted Irine and Fenesis, and was about to leave the room.

At this moment, Alzen said to him.

"Ahh, Kusla, right? Stay here for a moment."

Kusla stopped in his tracks, and turned his head around reluctantly.

"What is it?"

After Irine and Fenesis left the room, Alzen replied to that question.

In other words, he did not want them to hear it.

"About that girl called Fenesis."

Alzen briefly stated,

"We have done our investigations."

Kusla shrugged, and the other party gave him an unexpectedly sharp stare.

Fenesis was viewed by the Knights as a cursed tool that could trigger an issue of faith, and those that knew of her true identity should only be limited to those in power, like Autris. However, to pave the path for his forces, Alzen naturally investigated about Kusla, and the process in which he got Fenesis.

"The countries in the North are barbarians who can't understand the glory of the Knights. We have to have a tool that can easily shake the Pagans on appearance alone. In other words, while we aren't sure whether a young alchemist like you are able to contribute, that young lady is different. Do you understand?"

There was a limited space on the wagon. If there were tools that could be used, and could not be used, they would sort them.

Fenesis's appearance certainly could cause a major effect on the Northern lands. Without her, the Azami's Crest would not bother to bring the problematic Kusla and the others to Kazan. While it seemed she was merely doing miscellaneous tasks in that workshop, but to the Knights, Fenesis was more valuable than Kusla, whom they could replace.

Everything was decided based on pros and cons, and the practicality.

However, they did not force Fenesis away from Kusla, definitely because the latter offered Damascus Steel. There was a possibility that they could replicate the Damascus Steel, so the Azami's Crest would not cross the line.

This concerned Kusla's own Magdala, so he had no intention of stepping aside no matter who it was.

Furthermore, Fenesis would definitely be suffering most when she was being manipulated.

However, Kusla naturally would not express his thoughts. With a stoic look, he tried to appeal to Weyland.

"Understood. That girl has some strange sympathy for Weyland anyway, so I'll keep watch and make sure she doesn't do anything funny. I too want...to go to Kazan after all."

"..."

Alzen stared right at Kusla for a while, and averted his eyes.

"Good that you understand."

"Pardon me."

Kusla replied pretentiously, and Alzen waved his hand, shooing him like an insect.

Naturally, Kusla had no intention of staying for long, and thus, he hurriedly fade farewell, and left.

Soon after he opened the door and walked away, he found Fenesis and Irine standing there.

He did not say anything as Irine was there, but after seeing Fenesis, he sensed that she probably eavesdropped on their conversation with her ears.

They returned to the workshop, and Irine went downstairs to remove the ash that was left after the steaming the previous day, so Kusla and Fenesis were left alone in the living room. Kusla gave a nonchalant look as he opened the book on how to extract gold, while Fenesis remained seated on the chair.

She really can't hard her feelings, but that makes her cuter.

"Erm—"

"What?"

Kusla interrupted Fenesis, and the latter cringed immediately, but she did not keep remain quiet.

"Weyland."

"Just give up."

"..."

Kusla looked at her, and said,

"No, you still don't understand? At this point, it's better for you to pray."

That kind of teasing tone probably annoyed Fenesis, for she raised her eyebrows and glared at him.

"You overheard our conversation, didn't you?"

He stated briefly, and Fenesis was honest in her response, taken aback.

Why is she still able to believe she can argue with me? Kusla could not understand.

"Then you should understand the reasoning now, right? No more of that now."

Kusla went back to looking at the book, as though the matter had ended. However, Fenesis continued on with a trembling voice.

"I do understand the reasoning."

"Then—"

"In other words, if I do not go to Kazan, neither will you."

"..."

If they had been discussing about something else, Kusla would probably pat her on the head, saying *Not bad*.

And she would scowl, being all giddy with happiness while saying, *Please do not make fun of me*.

Kusla could easily imagine this scene, and thus, he felt really conflicted by Fenesis' shallow thoughts.

"I told you not to express your true thoughts, didn't I? If I had known you were so concerned about this, don't you think that I'll tie you up and throw you into the warehouse? Or are my words too difficult for you to understand?"

"!"

Fenesis stood up with a tense look. However, she sat on the chair again, probably because the long hem of her nun habit was hooked on somewhere.

Such a foolish girl.

Kusla was not in the mood to laugh.

"I understand how you feel about wanting to help weyland. Besides, he bought raisins for you."

"I was not bribed by food—"

"But in any case, leave him alone. He deserves it. Most importantly, why do you want to be Weyland's ally? Looking at that God's teachings you kept nagging about, he committed adultery. Do you understand? Adultery."

"I-I know that."

Fenesis bit her lips hard, her face reddened due to the predicament.

Kusla wanted to continue nagging, but there was some truth to Fenesis' words.

For the Azami's Crest, Fenesis was the valuable one, and not Kusla. Kusla and the others simply managed to somehow buy the right to head to Kazan through that Damascus Steel.

And thus, Kusla gave Fenesis a somewhat serious look.

"Listen up. Weyland fell into the honey due to his own carelessness. The one who came up with that plan is Autris. He's a shady one, and a smart bloke too. He caught that weakness of ours, and used the pride of the Knights and the excuse of the future developments to hold Weyland down. Autris gets to get back some pride after being bluffed by us. This is also a good chance for that noble Princess to owe him a favor. Autris is for real this time. If we force our way through this matter, we'll just bring about misfortune."

Fenesis was not a foolish one, and she probably could understand after some earnest, dedicated teaching.

Do you understand? With a skeptical look, Kusla looked at her, and she immediately cringed, glaring at Kusla.

"My misfortune...is not that I cannot go to Kazan."

“...That’s a deep one.”

“Why?”

Fenesis said, and was silent.

“Hm?”

Kusla asked back, and Fenesis wiped her eyes, saying,

“Why are you able to remain so calm?”

“...Calm?”

“Y-yes. Why are you able, to remain, so calm, like you are counting something...”

“That’s because I understand how the world works. No matter how many hundreds of times this happens, my response shall always remain the same. I will never choose to help Weyland.”

That was the secret as to how Kusla was able to continue on to this point as an alchemist, not fall into any traps, and not deviate from the target. This probably was the only path leading to Magdala.

Whenever he acted on his feelings, whenever he got tripped up by the bonds, he would be further away from Magdala, and become a sacrifice to other people’s malice.

Kusla gently scratched the burn on the back of his neck, and said,

“You think I’m heartless, don’t you? But have you forgotten? I’m an Alchemist.”

There was no room to negotiate.

Fenesis probably realized this too, and she took a deep breath, the headpiece puffing as she exploded with this one line.

“You’re terrible!”

She toppled the chair, stood up, turned around, and ran to the bedroom.

She was a typical child who was overflowing with compassion, one who would cry seeing an abandoned pup, one who would shriek seeing a bird fall by a branch.

An ordinary person probably would hail her as kind. Unfortunately, this was an Alchemist’s workshop, so feared by the world. That kind of compassion was meaningless in such a place, and even detrimental.

Kusla watched Fenesis slam the door shut with all her might, and shrugged.

At the market, she demonstrated to Kusla what to do in order to survive, but that seemed to be limited to preparing for journeys. Meanwhile, Kusla could only leave Weyland’s situation aside. Only by living on heartlessly was he befitting of the nickname ‘Kusla’.

He did not think it was shameless to do this.

But the sudden stare towards him did not feel that way.

“Do I have to give you the same explanation?”

Kusla did not look at the stare, and Irine, peeking in from the stairs, poked her head out unwillingly.

“Grandpa always told me this.”

“What?”

“I have to be decisive when working.”

Irine sat on the stairs, not looking too friendly as she looked at Kusla, saying,

“Do one thing, and don’t hope to get the same results.”

“To be expected of that old man.”

Kusla was really impressed.

Irine did not look too proud however.

“Are you really going to abandon Weyland?”

“Don’t make it sound so bad.”

“But that’s it, isn’t it?”

Irine asked with a reproaching tone, and Kusla gave her a condescending look.

“Yes. Just as I walk by a man who fainted from hunger on the roadside.”

Any town would have such people, and the others would ignore. This seemed to have pricked Irine’s consciousness, and she frowned, but she did not back down.

“But Ul does seem to be serious about this.”

Irine had been calling Fenesis by her name, probably because that was what Weyland called her, or because their relationship improved over the past few days.

“And I’ve been thinking, is it really fine to go along with someone who’ll abandon his comrades at will?”

“But you have nowhere else to go now, don’t you?”

Irine let out an alluring smile.

"Worst case, I still have Damascus Steel to rely on."

That thing could only be used once, and thus, it was effective.

And if anyone else knew that this could be replicated again, the risk would increase. Irine knew, but this was her final trump.

"Well...I'll say what I really think. While I think you're right on this one. I too came here because of a stubborn reason, so in any case, I can't go back to the blacksmiths. I want to go to Kazan no matter what."

Kusla closed the book, and stared right at Irine, asking,

"Something I want to ask. Why are you so biased towards Weyland?"

"What about you? Aren't you friends?"

She answered Kusla with a question of her own, her face practically saying that if he did not answer this, she would never speak up. No matter how far she had fallen, she was one who was trained rigorously in a blacksmith's workshop.

Kusla answered,

"To me, my definition of companions is, whether they are useful to me."

"...How terrible to you."

"Really? That's still better than those who hold some vague ideals. They always yell companions here and there for no reason at all, only to betray and the crucial moment. The concept of value won't betray though, and if they are useless, I can simply cast them aside. I won't be betrayed due to annoyance, and I won't reach my hands out because I like someone. Simple, and fair."

Irine was at a loss of what to say.

She probably knew that talking ethics and morals to Kusla would not be effective.

“What about you? Smitten by Weyland?”

Hearing that, Irine finally stood up.

She snorted, and said,

“In a certain sense, maybe.”

She then continued,

“Before I came here, back when I was in the Guild, I thought he was just an evil man who just wanted to mate with women.”

To be expected of a blacksmith, the terms used were different.

“But you found yourself to be wrong after talking to him?”

Kusla noted sarcastically. Irine closed her eyes unhappily, and nodded unwillingly.

“He’s a kind one.”

“Only to women.”

“Better than someone who isn’t kind to anyone.”

Irine was no slouch at talking back.

That was why it was fun to talk to her. However, Kusla stopped joking, and got serious.

“Because I never expected that the serious Fenesis would be so protective of him.”

“...To be honest, this might sound like a complaint.”

Irine scratched her head.

After hesitating a little, she spoke,

"I guess I may be mesmerized by Weyland's sweet talk too."

"Oho?"

"I asked him why he was always spending so much effort wooing girls, and he looked so happy when he answered, I feel happy when they smile at me, so he said'."

"Hah."

Kusla chuckled, and even Irine did so.

But after saying this, she let out a little sigh,

"I don't really like to talk about gossip...but that noble Princess who asked to wed Weyland is a very famous person in this town. There are some rumors about her too."

"Bad taste in men?"

"...A little close. No, well, actually, it's way off."

Kulsa felt disinterested seeing how Irine did not complain.

Irine sorted her thoughts out, and said,

"Her name is Flau Fon Hindenburg. Miss Flau was once married."

"...And?"

"Of course, she's of noble birth, so she was engaged before she was born. However, it was to a ruler nearby infamous for being rotten and uncaring for his people. A lot of people could not tolerate the heavy taxes and unreasonable punishments of the land, and escaped to this town. However,

that land had a rich forest and produced the wood needed for this town's burning, the honey needed to preserve the food, and wheat to feed the horses, and the ruler controlled the supply of these resources. The nobles were in Gulbetty, ruler of the town back when they were a Pagan town, and even till now, the Knights remained skeptical of them. If they married someone very important to the town's prospects, they could erase all doubts the Knights had...basically, it was a political marriage for mutual benefits."

This often happened.

Kusla had no interest in this. Irine's voice got shrill.

"How harsh of you. In the end, Miss Flau was married to the ruler, which was one thing. Later on, she never participated in Gulbetty's events. Everyone was puzzled, and later on, they found out that the ruler locked her in the castle. He was so jealous that he wanted to possess her for himself. Also, it was said that he was violent to her. After an Archbishop's ruling, Miss Flau was finally divorced. She returned to her home, and when she arrived in the town, the entire town raised a festival to celebrate for her."

"I understand. Weyland sympathizes her for this unfortunate marriage? Then, how does it change the fact that Weyland deserves it?"

Kusla's words left Irine speechless.

I still want to talk, her face was practically stating that.

And so, unable to endure this anymore, she let out a sigh, and continued on,

"Those women he reached out to are probably all like her."

"..."

"At first, I thought he was simply seizing an opportunity."

Irine looked spiteful, but she sighed, and lowered her shoulders.

I feel happy when they smile at me.

He was someone who would kill without flinching. However, he had that kind of nature to him, to say such frivolous words with a serious look. Weyland was a simple man, but on first glance, one would think that he was a complicated man; that was probably due to how devoted he was to his own thoughts.

“And Weyland did not throw a tantrum.”

“Hm?”

“He seemed so weak. If your lover doesn’t want to go with you, and tried to trap you, you’ll be raging, right?”

“...I won’t deny that.”

Kusla hesitated for a moment, and admitted it. Irine looked a little awkward as she giggled.

“And didn’t he say that the feelings that Princess has for him are real? I don’t think that’s to gain some sympathy. He’s really a kind man.”

Kusla never cared about what kind of person Weyland was.

He was only interested in something else.

“In other words, Fenesis has the same thought as you.”

“I guess. So when I saw you simply abandon Weyland, it’s to be expected that all she sees is a heartless fellow.”

“Unfortunately, my other name is ‘Interest’.”

Kusla would typically be saying this in a taunting, intimidating manner, yet at this time, he actually explained the meaning of this line. He never expected the situation to end up this way.

“But why?”

Kusla muttered to himself.

“If we continue to do nothing, we can go along with the plan and head to Kazan. If we do something now, we might end up being abandoned in this town. You should understand from that conversation that the Herald holds no goodwill towards us.”

In that case, it was easy to understand what any sane person would choose.

“Someone one told me that if any blacksmith is to do whatever they want, things will not end well for them.”

That was the concept Kusla wanted Fenesis to understand.

“You’re no longer a blacksmith.”

And with Kusla pointing this out, Irine lowered her head.

“That’s why I’m hesitating.”

‘Hesitating?’

She closed her eyes, groaned, and said,

“I’m hesitating over whether I should tell you, Ul isn’t as weak as you imagine her to be.”

“Ah?”

Kusla inadvertently retorted. *Wait*, he stood up immediately.

The wooden window of the living room was slightly opened, and from Irine's standing position, he could see the outside

He hurriedly rushed to the bedroom, and opened the door.

The room was empty.

"She probably ran off to the Hindenburgs."

"Damn it."

Kusla cursed, and hurried out of the workshop.

It did not matter if Fenesis did not know where the Hindenburgs stayed; her residence was definitely near the section in the town where the nobles gathered.

And slightly north of the town center, at the top of the hill, was the ideal residence of the nobles.

First, grasp the range, and run over, and then ask for directions.

Surely Fenesis would have done the same. The finely shaped ladies chatting happily in front of the shop showed sparkles of curiosity in their eyes as they mentioned that a nun came running over. It appeared there was a reason as to why they were curious.

Of course, Kusla ignored them and went after Fenesis.

There would be trouble if Fenesis was to slip into the garden of the Hindenburgs, but Kusla worried too much.

A petite white figure was arguing with the gatekeeper in front of a large, luxurious garden.

“I have something to say to Weyland. Please.”

“I told you that no such person is here.”

The gatekeeper looked perturbed, and was about to push her aside.

Typically, there would be the poor begging for accommodation, fortune tellers selling strange medication to beg or tout their goods.

But Fenesis was different from them, and thus, the gatekeeper was at a loss.

It was due to her attire.

“We’re going back.”

Kusla walked over, and grabbed Fenesis by the back of her neck, dragging her off without showing any signs of relent.

Her appearance resembled that of a feline, but she was struggling like a fish being hooked. She was basically an animal.

She continued resisting, trying her best to break free from Kusla’s arm, but no matter how hard she tried, Kusla would not let go. He grabbed Fenesis by the back of her neck, and dragged her off.

Fenesis struggled for a little while, but appeared to quiet down soon after, and so, Kusla let go.

“You went to look for Weyland, didn’t you?”

Fenesis did not walk by Kusla’s side, and neither did she walk behind him, but in front of him.

She was not pouting, not terrified.

Simply furious.

“It’s impossible to find him in such a place.”

Even though Fenesis pretended not to hear Kusla's words, the two edges under her hood twitched.

Kusla sighed, and continued,

"Nobles normally take in their loves in another house. The place Weyland is at is probably locked now. If he wants to escape, he's able to. He hasn't done it though, because he knows that if he goes against these feelings of his, it'll get trouble—"

"I do not wish to listen."

Fenesis harshly noted.

The fisherman they just passed looked back, wondering what was going on, but other than that, there were no one else on the streets.

The streets were quiet.

"It's up to you whether you want to listen to me, but reality won't change. Give up on Weyland."

Fenesis did not look back, and did not answer.

"If we go interfere reckless, we'll just have Autris set his eyes on us. You know he's trying to take us down in one fell swoop."

"You will be the one troubled about that. I will not."

Fenesis spoke with a rigid tone.

Kusla held back the urge to click his tongue. Why was she so stubborn?

"And what do you intend to do after seeing Weyland? Encourage him by saying, let us work hard together?"

Fenesis was speechless.

"If you want to help him, you'll have to convince that Princess, or prove that he's an alchemist. What do you intend to do? You haven't thought about it, have you?"

Fenesis slowed down.

Kusla had a feeling that it was pointless for him to keep talking, so he never said anything.

The distance between Fenesis and him was not too far, but definitely not within arm's reach. Kusla could not help but sense that Fenesis was distant from him, due to the events that transpired at the market.

And so, both of them wordlessly returned to the workshop. Fenesis remained silent, grabbed the Book she wanted to read, and ran off to the basement workshop.

Irine gave Kusla a stunned look, but the latter merely shrugged.

Of course, this did not mean that Irine was standing on the same side as Kusla. She wanted to check on Fenesis, and went to the basement.

Before this, no matter how often she was teased or pranked on, Fenesis would always appear at the living room for dinner.

But on this day, she never showed up. Irine was not an expert at meditation, but she could understand what both sides were thinking. And so, she was in charge of bringing the food to Fenesis.

Kusla could understand what Fenesis was thinking. The best case scenario would be if Weyland could be saved. However, the problem was that Kusla would have to tackle this obstacle, to take risks.

Kusla had no obligation to save Weyland, and this had no benefit to him. If the roles were switched, it was likely that Weyland would not save Kusla either. Kusla too would have felt that he had done something stupid, and choose to give up. This was a common rule in the profession of an alchemist.

And so, Kusla kept watch over Fenesis the entire night, to prevent her from escaping from the workshop.

There was a loud commotion in town since morning the following day, so much uproar, that it seemed a King had just returned victorious. The main team of the forces with Azami's crest emblem had arrived.

They were in charge of seizing the reviled pagans' towns, and convert them to residences of the Holy Lord's sheep. The people in town were celebrating the arrival of such a sacred forces.

For the people of Gulbetty, if Kazan was converted into an Orthodo town, they would be able to increase their trade value and make the town more prosperous. The current market was filled with goods from Kazan, and the convenience of using faith as a statement was clear for all to see.

Kusla walked out of the workshop, and looked out from the top of the cliff, seeing the area surrounding the port to be really bustling. The naval fleet entering through the water routes arrived along with the main forces of the Azami's Crest.

The Knights were the strongest organization that mixed belief, military might and financial power.

Looking at Gulbetty from afar, one could clearly understand the meaning behind these words. Kusla realized that he was in such a massive

organization, and his heart inadvertently felt a conflicted sense of powerlessness and omnipotence.

There were so many people everywhere who had such great power.

If he was careless, he would fall into their traps.

Kusla narrowed his eyes, and at this moment, Irine too walked out.

“Looking lively out there.”

“Did you dress up as much as you want?”

“Why? We’re not going for a dance.”

Irine replied unhappily, and Fenesis stood behind her.

“Close enough. Set up a parade in front of those in authority. Other than that, we just need to keep a low profile.”

“...That’s an annoying way of life.”

“The shape of the lock determines the shape of the key after all.”

“Then you better pray that there’s treasure behind that door.”

Kusla snorted, and walked out.

At dawn, a messenger visited the workshop, requesting for them to visit the nobles leading the Azami’s Crest, Archduke Kratal. As an Alchemist, Kusla was one of the prized possessions of the Knights, so naturally, he had to be treated differently from the small fries.

“Maybe he wants to extort Damascus Steel from us.”

“Is the Archduke that greedy?”

“Only with greed can you amass wealth.”

Irine shrugged.

She, being adept at talking, was used to the sarcastic conversations with Kusla. It was probably due to the practice she had with the cheeky blacksmiths in their workshops.

However, it was also likely that she spoke so much because Fenesis was not willing to say anything.

Fenesis brought something very special along.

"Hey, what's that?"

Even when Kusla asked her, she ignored him. She continued hugging the old book, and remained silent.

Surely she was plotting something, but Kusla did not know the details.

If he continued to spite her and anger her, it was likely that he would have to chain her by the neck and drag her off when they were to leave. Thus, Kusla decided to ignore her.

They arrived at the Knights' building, and found bright petals of the seasonal flowers scattered all over the road. The soldiers were standing in rows, holding their lances as they quietly awaited the arrival of the Archduke.

Of course, Kusla and the others could not enter from the front door, so they entered the building through the back door.

The Knights' building was typically empty whenever they came by, but on this day, it was crowded.

Kusla felt that it would be trouble if he were to meet Autris, but it seemed this worry was unnecessary.

Probably, Autris would be eagerly standing by the Archduke's side when they were to meet.

"Ah, you're here."

They arrived at the Herald's officer, and a young lieutenant who was with the Herald the entire time called them.

"After the town's nobles provide their officers, there'll be a moment with the audience. Basically, when the Archduke speaks to you, just bow. That Archduke is an eccentric one though, so be careful."

"Eccentric?"

"He likes some entertainment. He mixed up Alchemists and jesters once before. At a town before this place, some were forced to play firebreathing."

"...We'll take heed of that."

Irine looked tense, probably because there were too many people. Fenesis in turn was not. She lowered her head, the eyes under the hood gloomy.

She'll be obedient the entire time. Looks like there won't be any problems.

And so, Kusla and the others were summoned to the waiting Archduke along with the other residents. They spent some time in the house of a wealthy person. Some cautiously brought their wooden boxes forward, while others carried posh looking bags. These probably were merchants who knew that if their gifts could leave a good impression on the Archduke, they would be rewarded far more than what they had given.

But while they were offering the wealth in their hands, Kusla was going to offer himself.

As long as he felt it was of benefit to him, he would be willing to grovel to others for the sake of moving towards Magdala. He did not care how many times he had to get on his knees and beg, how sleazy his praises would be. If the Archduke wanted him to perform some fire breathing, he would do whatever he could.

However, the only things he would not do, were the things that would get in the way of his path to Magdala.

Even without Weyland around, Kusla would not show any guilt.

He felt that there was no need to be guilty.

If not, he would basically be denying his prior life.

“Next, Ladell Merchants!”

Holding the namelist was the youth from before. He brought a few soldiers along, and after a summon, headed off to the hall at the end of the corridor. There were fewer people waiting in the room, but Kusla did not know when he would be summoned. Irine was feisty and bold in her actions, but even she was feeling so tense and jittery at this point. This would be the first time in her life that she would be standing in front of a noble. Kusla glanced aside at Fenesis, who remained still and seated away from him. The thick book was laid out on her lap, and she hid her face underneath the hood.

She appeared to be thinking.

She's probably tense. Thinking about this, Kusla realized that the thick book at her knees looked like a Bible. Fenesis was once kept as a cursed tool by the Choir, and she was probably used to such a scene. That Bible was probably prepared for this occasion. Once the ears were revealed, and she

was exposed as a heretic, she would then bring the Bible to her chest, and beg earnestly for forgiveness.

Kusla imagined that scene, immediately felt a sense of disgust, and hurriedly turned his face away.

Fenesis' character was of one who would charge into misfortune on her own volition.

Thinking about this, Kusla could not help but reaffirm his thoughts of wanting to protect Fenesis. Perhaps the feelings were no different from seeing a trembling kitten by the roadside and cradling it.

Then, perhaps he had no reason to reproach Fenesis on her overly ridiculous emotional reasoning to help Weyland.

Thinking, Kusla suddenly realized something.

Weyland?

He looked down at Fenesis' hands, and while the pages in that book were tattered, there was a neat piece of paper protruding out from within.

A label. What was that?

Recently, Fenesis had been reading a book with some mysterious myth like the Golden Sheep.

Fenesis, her personality, the brooding face, Weyland, and the Archduke whom they were to meet.

Kusla instinctively reached his hand out for the book at Fenesis' knees.

At that moment, he saw her eyes.

And immediately after, the youth from before showed up.

"Next, the alchemist."

He was called out, not by his name.

Kusla had no time to think, but Irine was not afforded such a luxury.

What happened at that instant caused her to widen her eyes in shock, startled.

"...What happened?"

The youth asked, and Kusla grabbed Fenesis by the shoulders as she slumped on him, answering,

"She's too tense. Not feeling well."

"Really? Hey."

The youth commanded the soldier beside him, but Kusla rejected it.

"It'll be rude to bring my assistant along to meet the Archduke. I'll have her take care of this one."

"Understood. Hurry."

Irine witnessed Kusla smack the back of Fenesis' neck with his hand, and was brooding over whether she should chide him. Looking at the situation however, she chose to take care of Fenesis.

"Have her sleep on this."

Saying that, Kusla picked up the book that fell from Fenesis' lap. The book opened to the page with the label when it landed.

It was a glamorous picture related to an ancient myth.

A lion's body, a serpent's tail, a beast with two wings.

One could easily understand what Fenesis intended to say to the Archduke.

“Say that she’s created by an Alchemist?”

There were such myths in the history of alchemy, where Alchemists would fuse different lifeforms together to create a new life.

“That’s a really bad joke...”

Kusla muttered as he followed the youth.

The meeting with the Archduke ended well, and left a great impression on Kusla.

The Azami’s Crest forces were not one that aggressively foguth; their main objective was to regain peace and civil order in the towns they conquered. Because of that, Kusla originally assumed that the Archduke leading the forces was a feeble, demure man. However, he was a hulk with a round waist and a blazing red beard. The Archduke remained smiling when they met, and truly, it was befitting of the forces being harbingers of hope. It was to be expected why such a man would enjoy entertainment.

The Archduke was one who was interested in anything and everything. One could even sense that he would head to the conquered Pagan towns out of his own interest.

But the main issue at this point was Fenesis. She had yet to regain consciousness even when they were to return to the workshop, so Kusla carried her all the way back. Her body was slender, frail, so soft that Kusla suspected that there might not be bones in her body. That was why Kusla held back when he smacked her neck.

“Mind telling me the reason?”

Irine sounded calm, but her eyes were wide open, and she stared at Kusla intently.

She was basically saying, *If your reply doesn't satisfy me, I'm not going to let you off easily.*

Kusla hesitated.

However, this might be the perfect moment to reveal the truth.

"How open-minded do you think you are?"

"Hm?"

Irine frowned, and glared at Kusla, seemingly questioning if Kusla was fooling around with her.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing specific. Have you heard of her bloodline?"

"This...but...what has it got to do with this-?"

Kusla removed the hood from Fenesis' head, revealing those beast ears.



Irine was momentarily stunned, and she looked back and forth between Kusla and Fenesis.

"This one here has a cursed blood, but till this point, I haven't really experienced it. She looks like she's bound by her own curse."

Kusla did not ensure that Irine was listening.

He covered the hood back, and Irine seemed to be finally released from some hypnosis, shocked.

"Going to report to the Church?"

Kusla smiled as he asked, and Irine gave him a stoic look.

The rational mind, emotions and religious belief in her heart were jumbled together, and she did not know what expression to show.

However, a person's fondness, or lack of, could be concluded instantaneously.

Irine was calm when she saw Fenesis' ears.

This alone showed that she was calm to some extent.

Thus, Kusla did not wait for Irine to reply, and placed the book Fenesis took to the table, opened it, and showed it to Irine.

"She put a label here. Have a look."

Saying that, he pushed the book to the still skeptical Irine.

The latter stared at Kusla, not moving at all, and slowly swallowed her saliva.

She closed her eyes, saying,

"I believe what I can see."

Kusla inadvertently shook his shoulders slightly.

"Then have a look at this."

He pointed a finger at the book.

Irine widened her eyes, and stared at Kusla intently, taking a deep breath.

Her eyes finally landed upon that book, and seeing the contents, she shrank back. This reaction probably was not something that could be controlled rationally.

"The illustrations contain mythical creatures. But in the myths about Alchemists, there are stories of how some are able to fuse dead creatures to create a new one. It's said that there's a way to fuse dead bodies together, and let the blood flow. Such myths sound probable, but unfortunately, I never heard of anyone who succeeded."

"..."

That illustration gave a chilling feeling, and Irine's face went pale as she froze up.

However, the reason why she paled was because she found the resemblance of this illustration to Fenesis.

"She's probably thinking that if she declares herself to be created by an Alchemist, she'll be able to save Weyland, I guess. Looks like she went to Weyland so that she could tell him about this plan."

After some stunned moments, Kusla spat,

"Such stupidity. She was going to do such a thing so publicly. Those people from the Church are there, and there'll be a whole lot of ruckus as a result."

The chaos can be quelled if we're lucky, but do you think we'll be able to make it to Kazan easily? This fool."

Kusla remembered the reasoning to do anything for one's objectives.

But there were many ways to be unscrupulous. Fenesis really would not choose. She never considered about herself, and would devote herself to her objective, no matter how meaningless or ridiculous it was.

He felt that this was tantamount to suicide, always had been. That was the vibe Fenesis gave when she was used as a tool by the Choir.

Kusla only took Fenesis in because he had enough, because he felt that there was no fool more worth protecting than her. He felt that it had been going well recently, but he might not be able to go along with her will with regards to Weyland.

It was common to see companions scatter and move away on their own.

No, perhaps it was a common occurrence, and because of that, she was unwilling to have a companion leave?

"B-but."

While Kusla was wondering, Irine finally spoke up. She put the book down, and put her hand on her mouth, ostensibly suppressing the tension in her heart. She took a deep breath, before saying that.

Such a feisty woman. Kusla could not help but marvel.

"Then, what do we do now?"

"Chain her up and throw her into the luggage."

With a stoic expression, Irine fumbled around on the table, and took the candlestick.

"I want to say that, but,"

If Kusla had not said that, it was likely that Irine would slam the candlestick onto his head.

"She's always like this when she's stubborn, never caring about herself, and never thinking of the consequences."

"But...you aren't going to save him, right?"

Kusla glanced aside at Fenesis.

He gave a wry smile. This predicament left him in a dilemma.

"Right. It was the same with you."

"Eh?"

"She noticed that you were suffering at the Guild, and asked me to save you. She feels that I'm a good person who'll save anyone."

Irine shivered, and cringed back, probably because the topic was directed at her, or probably because she did not know how to respond to Kusla's words. She appeared to be peeking.

"Is it...funny?"

"Very. She thinks that since I saved her, I'm a good man who'll save anyone."

Kusla stroked the sleeping Fenesis with his fingers, and she twitched her eyebrows lightly.

"It's ridiculous. She knows that I'm an Alchemist. I only act for my own benefit."

"..."

Irine stared at Kusla, and lowered her shoulders weakly, placing the candlestick onto the table.

"I heard about how you saved her. I also heard about her cursed blood, but I never thought that they'll be...such cute additions."

She actually said that they were cute additions.

Irine was a little different from those who were born in the towns and grew up in the narrow worlds. She experienced hardship, and travelled from one town to another, which meant that she was slightly more open-minded than the ordinary person, and this was likely some bad karma.

"But she looks rather happy."

"..."

Kusla went silent.

"She really wants to save Weyland, I guess, but...I think...there's another reason that she's doing such unexpected actions."

"...Another reason?"

Kusla looked away from Fenesis and towards Irine. The latter too looked away from Fenesis and towards Kusla.

"She has expectations of you, and that's why she took unnecessary hurt."

"..."

"She doesn't want to think that the one who saved her is a bad person, I guess."

"I'm not a bad person."

Kusla shrugged as he said.

Irine frowned, looking as though she scented upon something foul from a tool item, but Kusla continued to show a smile on his face.

"I said it before, didn't I? The shape of the key is decided on the shape of the lock. It's because the world is like this that I have to learn the action of 'interest'. I'm not the one at fault. The world is."

At this moment, Fenesis groaned, probably because she had a nightmare. Kusla gently placed his hand onto her forehead.

"I'm troubled too to have hopes on me. My hands can only capture some ordinary things. The unpopular parts of the Church teachings are the correct ones. If a vessel is to try and hold more than what it can contain, it will break. And...never to recover."

Saying that, Kusla shrugged again.

"The townsfolk say that Alchemists are barbaric in their freedom, but actually, we ain't much."

"...Then, what do we do?"

As a blacksmith, Irine was able to say some realistic words that were helpful to Kusla.

"Tie her up in chains and dragging her off will mean that she's going to suffer like she did with the Choir. No choice then. What do we do?"

"So—"

"Let's go save Weyland."

Stunned, Irine stared back and Kusla, and asked,

"You can save him?"

"Don't know if it'll work, but I'll think of a way. But I got a request."

"...What?"

She stared at Kusla with intrigue, and seemed wary of him, afraid that he would ask something impossible.

"It's simple. Keep it a secret that I'm going to save Weyland."

"Eh?"

"Feed a stray dog or cat, and they'll desire more. The ones feeding them might be hunters desiring their fur though. Once this white cat feels that the world's filled with happiness..."

Kusla hushed his words as he said this.

"I'm different."

This world was so cruel, and illogical. Kusla knew very well that in such a thunderstorm, if he were to keep hoping for a savior every time, one day, he would end up with no way out.

He wanted to protect Fenesis, and wanted to continue down the inexplicable path towards the legendary, unattainable sword of Orichalcum.

However, it was unfortunately that both dreams clashed, for he could not take the action Fenesis would hope for every time.

Kusla could not say that he would continue living the rest of his life for the sake of women, like Weyland.

'Interest' never smiled, and never thought of smiling to anyone else.

But, for the sake of resting in the land of Magdala, he would aim towards that.

"Understood."

Irine seemed to understand, and slowly stated,

"You want to say that you have your own considerations."

"I'm a better man than Weyland, right?"

"Need me to tell you how many times he tried to wake Ul up?"

Irine noted quietly, and lowered her shoulders for some reason.

"Alchemists are really amazing people, more than I imagined."

"Fine words. Alchemists specialize in turning lead into gold after all."

Kusla said, and moved his hand away from Fenesis' forehead.

Act 4

But despite saying this, Kusla had no idea as to how he was going to do this.

Proving one's identity as an Alchemist was practically an unsolvable ordeal.

As Autris said, they would not be able to prove it if they could not go as far as reviving the dead.

And even in the myths about Alchemists, the art of revival was so ridiculous, it was considered something troublesome to discuss, and as overturned by many alchemists as the idea of turning lead to gold.

Reviving the dead would undoubtedly be resisting the truth of the world, and those that dared to challenge this power were not few in numbers.

But in fact, the records left by the past were just mockeries by people who had their brains boiled out by mercury vapor. There was an example of setting up a magic array, putting a pot above it, containing the semen of cow, the eyeballs of frogs, and the fresh blood of a virgin, boil the corpse in the mixture, chant a few spells, and one could revive the dead. In such situations, it was logical as to why some would seek clues in the in such myths, as Fenesis did. They assumed that by piecing corpses together and inserting horse blood, they would surely be able to revive the dead.

However, all plans ended in failure.

This was not because the ancients were fools. Rather, ancient records were more reliable. The ancients felt that one day, the dead could be revived, and thus entrusted their hopes on the corpses to preserve such techniques. Boiling corpses in pots containing all kinds of mixtures was considered heresy, however, the techniques to preserve corpses remained widely used

in the quest to preserve the bodies of the Saints who went running around the battlefields. Of course, only an envoy of the Creator could trigger the miracle called resurrection, so even if people had misconceptions about the preservation of corpses, they would not call it a ritual to revive the dead.

But the main drying agent used to preserve the corpses would be the yeast powder used for baking bread, and it was peculiar. People lived on bread, their corpses preserved by yeast powder. That thing was originally meant to make bread tastier.

Pondering about this, Kusla continued walking to a corner of the town.

It was said to be a quiet residential area, but the alleys inside were so complex, even an adult could get lost. In the bustling town of Gulbetty, there was such an old, dark area.

The security here was poor, and the people holed up here were those who could never see the light of day, rather than the low income group.

Kusla stepped over a stray dog that was lazing around, and arrived in front of a house.

The boss of a motel informed Kusla of this residence. Due to business reasons, they had a firm grasps of the buildings in the town, and wanted to prevent any random person from taking an empty house to build a motel and affect their business.

Thus, they knew everything well, even the house for the nobles to harbor their mistresses.

“You’re in, right?”

Kusla stood beneath a window, calling.

After a while, there was still no response. Only the sound of the kids playing afar could be heard.

“What is it~?”

Weyland’s voice could be heard. He had a hand on the window frame, but his face could not be seen.

“It’s not locked, right? Come down.”



Weyland seemed to be pondering as he remained there for a while, before he pulled his hand back. Soon after, the door opened.

“I never thought you would come save me, Kusla~”

Weyland looked lethargic, but it was not due to the wrinkles on his clothes. He always looked unenthusiastic, but this time, he looked really weary.

It was likely that the noble princess kept hugging him, pleading him all night long not to leave.

What is so good about this chap that is worth loving? Kusla could not help but wonder. However, lovers tend to beautify things.

“If you want to go back, you can go back anytime you want, right?”

“...Well, yeah~”

Weyland was not being locked up here.

This was a house for lovers to have their night espionage. He definitely had his reasons for not going out.

Thus, though Kusla had intentions to save Weyland to stop Fenesis from pulling mischief again, it would be better for him to hear of the man's will.

“Do you still have feelings for that lady?”

Weyland was leaning at the wall, showing Kusla a sheepish smile,

“Don't mock me now~...”

“It's your fault that we got into some unexpected troubles.”

Kusla grumbled, and looked back at Weyland, scratching his head.

"I guess it's a mistake to have two Alchemists together in the same workshop."

As expected, Weyland wanted to take full responsibility for this incident.

Kusla still felt that he was a scumbag, but he could make proper decisions on occasions that mattered.

"But you came to save me~"

"Friendship, I suppose."

Seeing Kusla's stare, Weyland finally let out a chuckle.

"You do know how to joke, Kusla. It's because of Ul, right~?"

The probably reasons were narrowed down to an extent one could make a valid guess.

However, Weyland was able to state the reason without hesitation, and it appeared that he could see through anything involving Fenesis.

Kusla sensed that he was peeved about this, and felt inadvertently anxious unnecessarily.

Was this not similar to jealousy?

"She was fuming about the fact that I wasn't willing to save you. I wanted to lock her by the collar and yank her off, but I decided not to."

"Oho..."

"However, I am curious as to what you think. What do you intend to do? Stay here and be protected by the noble for the rest of your life while continuing your research? In that case, I'll convey your thoughts to her."

Kusla said with a smirk, and Weyland looked down at the floor of the corridor, his head lowered, not leering away like usual.

Seeing Weyland in such a state astonished Kusla somewhat, more than the latter did when Weyland easily saw through Fenesis' intentions.

"Is Magdala just that much to you?"

Weyland lifted his head, showing a shocked face.

They wordlessly stared at each other, and the first to move was Weyland.

I got to hand it to you. He chuckled.

"Haha, looks like little Ul has become a little sharper~"

"Huh?"

"Nothing. But it is a waste of effort to hesitate now. Same goes for smelting~"

Weyland scratched his head, looked up at the ceiling, and said,

"I too wish to head to Magdala. That's why I have to go to Kazan. There's too little for me to obtain here, and life..."

Smiling, he let out a sigh,

"Is short~"

"Well, I'll give you a hand."

Kusla noted with displeasure, and Weyland cackled.

"Such a strange line~"

"For me, it doesn't matter what happens to you."

"..."

Weyland lowered his head, and peeked up at Kusla before averting his eyes, shrugging bitterly.

"But do you have any ideas?"

Hearing Weyland's question, Kusla bluntly replied,

"Do you have a plan?"

Weyland smiled, and again, he shrugged.

It would be bad if the noble princess was to come by, and Kusla bade Weyland farewell before then as he head off to the market.

From the chat with Weyland, Kusla realized that the former too was wondering if there was a way to seemingly revive the dead. All they could think of were some methods rumored on the streets, almost superstition level. Myths of reviving the dead were not unique only to alchemists, and there were such rumors everywhere.

Such rumors practically knew no boundaries between fantasy and reality, and it was only because of people's desire to revive the dead that all that glittered might appear to be the case.

But even so, there were some cases that were plausible.

And in such cases, there were a lot of such corpses found in the markets, so it would be easy to go there and gather. Thus, Kusla head off to that place.

He stopped in front of a butcher that had a lance stabbed through the head of a goat, sheep, and cow. The assistant inside was loudly promoting the freshly dissected meat. There were also hare and chicken meat hung up in front of the shop, and on first glance, one would assume it was a barricade.

Kusla stopped, pondering about his dilemma, and the shopkeeper, sharpening the chopper blade, called out to him.

"Welcome. Today's dinner...now, you're here for experiment ingredients, right?"

As to be expected of a butcher, Kusla could not help but think as he saw the beaming smile on the boss' face. Those who swing choppers that could cleave people in halves and metal rollers of bread that could crush a bull's skill would always be far gruffer than a blacksmith. If there was a riot in the city, these two guilds would likely be the ones leading the charge.

"I heard of a method to make chickens sleep in the past. Is that true?"

This sudden question left the boss a little perplexed, "Ahh." before he let out a chuckle.

"The assistants typically use this method when they're lining the chickens together before slaughter. Cover the chickens' eyes, stick their backs to the floor, hold them down, and they will freeze up. It does feel a little terrifying lining a few chickens together before slaughter."

"H...mm."

However, this could not be dismissed as reviving a dead chicken.

It was said that a chicken could jump about for a while even after its neck got chopped off, but that was not revival either.

Kusla stared at the chickens hanging there, *What if I put yeast powder in a chicken's belly?* at the same time, he wondered. A chicken with its belly expanded would not appear to be breathing.

"Are you looking for ingredients for magic?"

The boss gave an intriguing smile, both curious and skeptical.

"Has there been news of some dead body reviving and causing a commotion?"

"What?"

The boss raised the chopper to his shoulder, flexing his arm that was as muscular as a cow's thigh. Even a mercenary would not have such massive arms.

However, he appeared to be a nice fellow to talk to.

"Well, there are such sales from time to time."

"Oh?"

"But it will be troublesome if others is to find our shop's people to be foolish."

"Relax, I won't say it. On a side note, I'm going North tomorrow or the day after with the Azami's Crest coming to this town."

"Oh...well, why didn't you say so? Anyway, raw meat isn't suitable for travel, but we do deal with processed meat too. Right now, there should be some fine pork."

"That will depend on the contents."

Kusla chuckled, and the boss raised a smile.

He scanned his surroundings, and lowered his voice, saying,

"There are quite a few of such cases. However, those assistants that aren't used to this work will assume mistakenly that they're revived. They probably aren't fully awake."

"It's fine. How's the situation?"

"But this didn't happen in our shop, but the one next door."

The boss, mindful of his reputation, added this first, and then continued,

"The most common case was the corpse moving after their necks got chopped."

"No matter the livestock, they can move after their necks got chopped off, right?"

"Kind of. Chickens are the most unique with regards to this. However, livestock freeze up like rocks after dying. When the dead bodies move, people would say that they revived."

"Oho."

"Once such incidents happen, us in the know would understand that it was nothing much. Those oblivious will believe it to true though, sometimes even causing a tragedy."

Kusla stared at the boss with some intrigue.

"A few years back, there was a village nearby. Someone was dying, and the Father used the fragrance oil for baptism to send him to Heaven. After he died, he opened the eyes. Everyone said that it was a miracle, and there was a commotion. They canonized the dead man as a Saint, and the Father who applied the oil. It was fine if they stopped there, but they believe it was a miracle, even boldly proclaiming it. The Church ended up investigating, and so,"

The butcher pretended to cut the head off, doing it in such an eerily similar fashion.

"They were said to be deceived by the Devil. The Father was hanged, and the family of the dead was deemed as heretics, chased out of the village. If they knew that the dead could move, they would understand this was a coincidence."

That certainly seemed to be the case. There were quite a few alchemists who were fooled as well. Though he had such thoughts, Kusla could only think about how to make dead bodies move.

After all, Autris would not insist that the dead had to get up, talk, and continue with its daily life.

While Kusla was pondering, he heard a heavy sigh.

The butcher boss was glaring at him.

"Well then, are you going to buy anything"

Are you going to just listen? That was what the butcher was implying, so Kusla took out a few gold coins for the furious boss, buying some hares and chickens.

Fenesis was at the workshop, and Kusla did not want to let her see what he was about to do, so he went to Sophites' workshop.

People would assume an Alchemist would be preparing for some strange experiments if he brought chicken and hare back. However, if it was a visit to a blacksmith's workshop, everyone would assume it was a gift.

"But even so, that's too much."

Sophites said, looking a little mystified. The butcher broke a grin once he saw the gold coins, and decided to compensate Kusla appropriately. However, it was better to have more for experimenting.

"Want some?"

"...I don't know what you are planning, but this might bring about some retribution."

Sophites said as he picked up a round, pudgy hare.

"I'm looking for a way to revive the dead."

"..."

The blacksmiths of the same age as Sophites, well advanced in his age, had already ascended to the afterlife.

But after hearing Kusla's words, *Well, whatever you want.* he could only tilt his head in disbelief and mutter, before taking two hares to the kitchen.

"If I can make the hares open their eyes and cause a commotion, that will be enough."

Kusla recalled what the Herald said. They were headed North, to the area ruled by the barbaric, ignorant pagans. Fenesis' presence there could easily intimidate the pagans and once they saw her, the abnormality on her would strike fear in them.

Thus, if he could should a miracle of revival to the pagans, the commotion in that village would surely occur again. This should help the Knights suppress the pagans.

Thus, Kusla's group would be able to make their mark, and the Azami's Crest, so efficient at valuing gains and losses, might refute Autris' mischief and let Weyland come along to Kazan.

But as the butcher said, whether the eyes or face would move would simply be down to coincidence. It was said that the hands or bodies shaking were

common, but it was impossible to have a corpse reanimated back to life in front of everyone.

Also, hares and chickens were small, so the little actions might not be too obvious. Perhaps it would be more intimidating if something as large as a cow was moved. However, killing a cow itself was hard work, and that would be enough to cause a commotion. Thus, a revival performance might not be as effective as desired.

Back then, while Kusla was asking the butcher, he was wondering what would happen if yeast was used. If he had some yeast powder and wheat mixed inside a chicken's belly and have it expand, perhaps it would appear to be breathing.

Thinking about this, Kusla hurriedly borrowed some ingredients from Sophites' kitchen to experiment, but it was for naught.

While creating a visible timer, he found that the yeast was able to expand enough for a pot placed on it to topple, but it was too slow, way below his expectations.

"Stuff a chicken? That will be nice, but it takes too much effort. Also, since you're making it, you might as well stuff a quail inside it."

Sophites poked his head out from the kitchen to comment.

Kusla felt that Sophites understood luxurious cuisine quite a fair bit, but he decided to ignore it.

"The best way to do it is to wrap the quail in cow bladder, pour stock into it, and then stuff it into the chicken's belly. However, if you stuff too much of it, the filling might break. The fire..."

Sophites probably experienced the joy of cooking after he retired, for the complicated cuisine he mentioned was something Kusla never eaten back. Right when, Kusla was about to tell the rambling Sophites to shut up.

The fillings would break?

If the fillings break and cause impacts, it would make a dead chicken appear to be revived.

However, if stock could break a cow bladder, could it cause the body to jolt and feathers to flutter? Just a little movement would not be convincing enough.

Despite this, Kusla could not help but sense that the end of this thought patter might be what he was seeking. The anxiousness of having the answer right within his grasp caused him to scratch his head.

And then, his hand slid to the back of his neck, touching a burned place.

While the pain caused him to wince for a moment.

An appropriate item appeared in Kusla's mind.

"...So there's this too."

"And finally, about the spices...hm?"

"Do you know of any gold blacksmiths?"

"That was sudden. Well, I do."

"I have some things I want to collect."

Sophites raised his eyebrows in surprise, almost to the point of reaching the wrinkles on his forehead.

"Mercury and a cauldron?"

"I want to make some chicken filling."

All that was left was how to show it.

Even if Alchemists could show the world how to turn lead into gold. It was impossible for them to show the world how breaking the fillings could revive the dead.

Kusla made some preparations for the method he prepared. Technical-wise, it was not too complicated. Perhaps there was some difficulty in waiting for the right moment, but the most important aspect was to act it out.

Of course, he could not say it to Fenesis, so he wrote all the steps in a letter, and added Weyland's signature to it. To make it appear that it was delivered from where Weyland was in custody, Kusla had the town courier deliver a letter here.

And on the other hand, Kusla told the Herald Alzen that this method could effectively quiet the pagans in the North. He informed Alzen, for this method would come into effect when they head North, and even if he had to take them away from Autris, the gains would outweigh the losses. What Kusla was about to do would trigger a somewhat major crisis of faith, and thus, he came to discuss.

At the very least, he had to obtain Alzen's agreement. While the latter would not be moved by pleas, but if it were deals, it would be a different case.

The biggest issue however was that the one with the ultimate authority was the Archduke. After Alzen passed on word to the Archduke, the reply was

that the Archduke wanted to personally witness the effects. Thus, they had to summon crowds and make things lively.

In any case, the Archduke personally found it to be some decent entertainment.

Someone constantly curious enough to get Alchemists to perform fire breathing would certainly like this performance. Kusla was confident. He plotted a strategy that would make use of an Alchemist's 'plating' to its fullest extent.

And with everyone watching, he would be able to keep Autris quiet.

Thus, Kusla hurriedly went around the town, asking for a cauldron and wood. After all the preparations were done, he returned to the workshop.

Irine scowled, asking,

"...You want us...to wear this?"

Kusla did not know how seriously the Archduke viewed this experiment, how serious he was to affirm this, or whether he simply wanted this out of entertainment.

It was likely that for the nobles, the crusade against the pagans was merely a form of entertainment to pass the time. Thus, an Alchemist's maniacal search for the land of Magdala would be more unlikely to be in their sight.

Kusla would not curse out at any force he could not fight against making a mockery of him. He would simply live on as 'Interest' as per usual.

If, no matter what, the wishes of Kusla and the others would be down to the Archduke's decision, he could only abide by the Alchemist's code, and be prepared for everything.

Part of the preparations was the clothing Irine was holding.

“Wearing this can give quite a lasting impression.”

“Though you say so...”

Irine said, and took out the clothes she found in the storage, hesitating. As for Fenesis, it appeared she had no idea how to put on these clothes.

“This thing was used when that illness called the Black Plague was rampant, right?”

“It isn’t limited to the Black Plague. Whenever there is a plague, or poisonous gas, this would be worn. Actually, the bent part at the nose is stuffed with spices, but we don’t have to do this much. This however should be enough to please the Archduke.”

“...Understood. This is the only way, right?”

“Looks that way. I guess so too.”

Kusla casually quipped, glanced aside at Fenesis, and said,

“Irine. Lift the hem of her clothes a little higher. Also, do you understand the steps?”

“I do...but is this really alright?”

“I tried it out. It’s definitely fine.”

“...”

Irine nodded reluctantly.

“You’re fine with it too, right?”

Kusla said to Fenesis, who as usual, ignored the former.

However, she was really motivated, thinking it was Weyland's plan. It seemed there was no chance of it failing.

And as he held his tools, Kusla said.

"Let's go then."

News spread all over Gulbetty that the Church was going to carry out an experiment, to prove that this method could cause the ignorant pagans to succumb to the power of Orthodoxy. The Choir ranks in the Azami's Crest indicated that they did not care about the methods used, as long as it could wipe out the pagans. They felt that they would use anything that could work; perhaps, mentality wise, they were not too different from the Alchemists.

And so, there was wood stacked up at the plaza of Gulbetty, a large cauldron was set up there, while the onlookers who came by upon hearing the news were flooding the place. There was a tower set up at a position overlooking the venue, and a throne on it, which the Archduke was sitting on.

Kusla scanned for the Herald, and found that he was on standby beside the Archduke, along with Autris. Weyland was not present, but Autris looked on grimly. He too probably realized this experiment was for the sake of saving Weyland.

"Now then, let us have the Alchemist carry out the experiment. This is to erase the pious beliefs of the pagans, a recreation to the Truth God created."

Alzen took a step forward, raising the prized sword as a referee, and declared.

At the same time, he was announcing that no matter what happened next, all responsibility lied with the Azami's Crest.

"Begin."

The Archduke raised his right hand, declaring like a king.

Kusla arrived at the plaza, and bowed to the Archduke.

"I am the Alchemist Kusla. As according to the proposal by my comrade, the Alchemist Weyland, I hope to present alchemy that will strike fear in the ignorant pagans, my lord."

"Oho."

The Archduke, whose beard was messier than the fur on Fenesis' ears, looked delighted.

Kusla waved to a corner, gesturing for his assistants.

And at that moment, the atmosphere of the crowd at the plaza started to boil over.

Irine and Fenesis were dressed in protective clothing that indicated the ominous death, only used for treating plagues.

"Hey..."

"That's ominous..."

The crowd chattered, and there were even children beginning to cry.

From head to toe, the duo were dressed in robe-like clothing, two pieces of glass at their eyes, a sharp beak at their mouths, similar to a large bird, and even their fingertips were covered in clothes. Their fingertips had sharp hooks on, to scratch at the pus of the sick and let the dirty blood out. The

sharp beak at their mouths had spices in them, to filter off the airborne disease. In any case however, they appeared to be the envoys from hell using the magic of pagans.

However, this attire was one of the recognized tools by the Church. No matter how mysterious it looked, there was not a crisis of faith.

“This time, I shall show to everyone the Alchemy that is akin to betraying the truths of the world, and for this demonstration, I shall use a chicken.”

Kusla received the dead chicken from Irine’s hand, and then the butcher from before yelled, *It’s ours!* Kusla gave him a smile, and continued,

“This chicken was well alive, and even jumped a little despite its neck being snapped. But as everyone can see, it is dead.”

Kusla raised the chicken by the neck, and the head immediately dropped weakly.

“Some might be mistaken in thinking that what I’m going to do next is a ritual to revive the dead. That is not the case. In fact, you can think of it as basically collecting the soul left in the dead. Just like squeezing out the remaining traces.”

The onlookers, upon hearing Kusla’s words, looked at each other, and started to chatter. Their faces were that of one reproaching others for immoral acts, and at the same time, unable to suppress their curiosity.

Kusla nodded, seemingly delighted by their responses, and then turned to look at the mercury boiling in the cauldron.

The silver liquid swirled in the cauldron, and if one were to stare at it carefully, it would appear that he would be dragged to another place.

"Of course, this isn't something that can be done by us puny humans. We need to borrow the power of God."

Once he said that, as agreed upon, Fenesis held onto a Bible, went to the cauldron, opened it, and started mumbling some Psalms. Irine too followed suit, pouring some herbs and such in a pretentious manner, looking as though it was the real thing.

To the outsiders, they were like witches, praying, but they were using things created by the Church.

Irine stared at the mercury in the pot, and from beyond the glass, she gave Kusla a look.

"Now then, let us marvel at the power of God."

Once Kusla said that, Fenesis closed the book, and received the chicken from his hands.

"Calm down. This isn't difficult."

Fenesis did not look at Kusla, probably because she was still fuming, or nervous.

In any case, all he could only hope for was that things went smoothly.

Kusla moved away from Fenesis, and said,

"Mercury is supposed to mean death, but the movement of the soul's remains..."

Irine cautiously lowered a metal ladle into the mercury, looking somewhat anxious. Once the ladle went in, the mercury bubbled. It was obvious that it was at a dangerous temperature, but the most important aspect of this

experiment was the temperature. She did not lift up the ladle immediately, and the onlookers awaited her actions, ostensibly forgetting to breathe.

And at the same time, Fenesis knelt down beside Irine, inserted a funnel into the dead chicken's mouth, and held its body with her hands.



This heretical scene caused some in the audience to put their hands together, making prayers.

However, the prayers only lasted until Irine lifted the ladle.

Everyone was looking at a single spot. Irine held her breath, and lifted the ladle high up into the sky.

“This is Alchemy! Watch!”

And then, the boiling mercury was poured into the funnel.

A few days back, Kusla got burned by the mercury due to Fenesis's mistake. Mercury was viscous, and when it boils, the air bubbles were likely to gather within before exploding. To avoid this, one had to slowly stir it and heat it under low heat.

But at this point, Irine poured the already boiling from high above.

Like a large metallic hammer striking a red hot piece of metal.

And with a loud sound, the mercury exploded inside the chicken.

“Wo-woah!”

There was a commotion from the onlookers, and the bearded Archduke widened his eyes, standing up.

Irine placed the ladle down, and at the same time, Fenesis let go of the chicken and the funnel before setting down on her backside.

An unbelievable scene occurred in front of the crowd.

“Look, the chicken!!”

“It’s revived!”

The dead chicken twisted its neck, flapped its wings, and jumped up, even its legs were twitching in numbness. The boiling mercury continued to explode in the body, moving the muscles.

That overly violent action appeared as though someone was forcibly dragged back from the world of death, and yet, as though one's lifeforce was at its limits, making its final struggle. The chicken body's shook once, twice, thrice, and four times. The more it jolted, it lesser it appeared energetic.

However, the chicken soon quiet down. After a while, it merely twitched from time to time, and finally stopped.

The scattered feathers soon fluttered around the chicken that was collapsed on the ground, before it stopped moving.

The scalding mercury overflowed from the chicken's beak, as though its soul came out.

Everyone present was speechless.

Kusla faced the altar, and said.

"This can terrify the pagans now, right?"

The Archduke, leaning over from his seat, finally appeared to have recovered.

He coughed a little, stood up, and raised his right hand, saying,

"Alchemist, this act of Alchemy is stupendous! Enough to open the eyes of the pagans!"

It appeared the Archduke was elated.

Autris stared at Kusla with a grim look.

However, the Herald whispered a few words to him, and he barely managed to suppress the anger within him, nodding. He then turned to a corner of the plaza, pointing there. Kusla too looked over, and found Weyland standing there calmly, holding a noble princess by the hand.

“Now all that’s left is for him to decide what he wants to do.”

Kusla muttered to himself, looking down at Fenesis and Irine, seated on the ground. Both of them looked shocked, ostensibly taken by surprise at how effective it was.

The clothing used for treating the Black Plague covered their faces, and as Kusla could not see their faces, their reactions were up to his guesses.

“Right. Time to clean up.”

Only at this moment did Kusla act like an alchemist, saying this briefly.

In the end, Autris had to abide by the request of the Azami’s Crest, and let Weyland free. After some discussion, Weyland too had the noble princess grant him his freedom.

One had to wonder what Weyland said to that noble princess, but on the day after the performance, the noble princess was weeping as she bade farewell, but she did her best to make a smile.

The wagon carriage were lined up together, and Kusla was seated at the cargo, looking displeased as he watched this scene.

Irine, seated in the same carriage too, looked over, but she was murmuring something, probably envious or so.

Fenesis stood beside the carriage, staring at Weyland. The latter bade the noble princess farewell, and came running over. Fenesis was hesitant as to whether she should smile, but she finally did.

“Is this fine?”

Irine asked Kusla, who looked away from Fenesis, and open the book he got from the workshop.

“She can do whatever she wants.”

During the two days since then, Fenesis never said anything to Kusla, not once looking at him.

It appeared Irine abided by the agreement, and told Fenesis that it was Weyland’s plan.

Kusla never thought of admitting his part in this. He just hoped for Fenesis to not have any simple, innocent thoughts.

This thing called rage would only subside slowly as long as they worked together in the same workshop.

“You’re stubborn.”

“It’s a matter of a way of life. This is insistence.”

Irine shrugged, put her hand by the edge of the cargo carriage, and put an elbow there with her head in her hand, watching the town.

Irine probably would never return to Gulbetty again. If such a firm-willed lady was to cry upon leaving the town, it would be an interesting sight. Though Kusla had such a thought, Irine remained unfazed despite Sophites’ sudden appearance. She merely greeted him, and held his hand.

After doing that, Sophites left immediately. Perhaps he was worried about Irine doing anything rash if he stayed for long.

And finally, Weyland patted Fenesis on the head, the latter clearly elated at his return. He went to the side of the carriage, and hopped on.

Irine saw him board, hopped off, and went to the other carriage to sit with Fenesis.

“The great Alchemist Weyland has arrived~”

“Curse you.”

Weyland chuckled in response to that.

The front of the vanguard began moving, and soon after, the carriages Kusla’s group were on started to move.

“Without that experiment, I would have difficulty trying to convince her. You really helped me out there~”

“Right, you owe me one.”

“I’ll remember that~. But little Ul shouldn’t know?”

Kusla narrowed his eyes at Weyland, saying,

“I’m inhumane for not being willing to save you.”

“Haha. You really aren’t honest there, Kusla~”

“I might have considered if saving you could bring some benefit. It’ll be tougher to train her if she thinks of me as a kind person.”

“Hm...but without any friends, you will feel lonely, right? That’s a fine reason too~”

Does he intend to continue fooling around? Kusla could not do anything about this, and looked back at the book.

“But I never thought that you would really come save me there~”

He gave a look of vague intent.

Kusla could only shrug.

“Fenesis said something unexpected, and I had no choice but to save you.”

“I heard from Irine there. Little Ul was being decisive there, right?”

“Way too much.”

Kusla sighed, and stared at the loading platform of the carriage in front of him.

The Archduke at the plaza appeared pleased with Kusla’s group, and the soldiers too were shocked, and thus, they were treated as royalty.

At this point, they could simply sway about and reach their destination. They could relax.

“But she has learned how to do as she please, somewhat.”

“I heard from Irine that she wanted to declare herself as being part beast, made by an alchemist.”

“She’s always doing things without care of her own safety. No number of lives will be enough to save her from death.”

“It’s because of this that there’s value in protecting.”

Weyland said in a standoff manner, and casually laid down.

“I haven’t had a good sleep in a while. Let me sleep.”

"So that's the reason why Irine and Fenesis are angry?"

Weyland showed a smile, and immediately closed his eyes, snoring.

"Goodness."

Kusla cursed, and went back to reading.

During the time Weyland caused a ruckus, Kusla had been researching on the wanderers the Herald tasked him if. If they were prospectors investigating the mines, once he was done with them, he would probably be valued better. This incident itself pleased the Archduke, and with further progress, he should definitely be able to gain more freedom in Kazan.

He definitely could not let go of this opportunity, and provide some accomplishments.

Even if he had to rile up the wanderers or lie to the Archduke, he had to make contributions.

Kusla focused on the book.

Once they left town, the dry, frigid winds came blowing immediately, but he did not mind.

Act 5

Once they started moving with the Forces, Kusla noticed a few things. Even amongst the Forces, the vanguard really was placed at the front, entering the cities right behind the scouts and the Heralding Officer. They were a group of people who could be inserted into a real battle at any given moment.

Thus, it was expected that most of the people in the Vanguard forces were combatants, but it seemed not all of them were of the Knights. These people were extremely rowdy when they partied hard in Gulbetty, but they seemed to have mellowed out soon after leaving the town, and several of them talked to Kusla and the others.

These people appeared to be mercenaries, and not formal members of the Knights. However, they came along to the battlefields with the archduke, so everyone knew each other. If something was to happen though, one had to wonder if they would turn on each other. The few that spoke to Kusla said that they intended to fight for the positions of the town soldiers once they got to Kazan, and bid farewell to the outside world, but these were still uncertain at this point.

They were rather bold to be actually chatting with an alchemist so heartily. However, a deeper reasoning behind that would be that, having witnessed that performance by Kusla in Gulbetty, they wanted to be on good terms with Kusla and the rest so that they could possibly have some recognition in the future.

They said this war was coming to an end, and wanted to find a place to settle down. Some of them even recommended themselves, hoping to be bodyguards to the alchemists.

Sophites once said that the migrants were basically bandits seeking treasure.

Mercenaries especially were such a bunch. The leader of the mercenaries would obtain an according amount of reward from the Archduke based on the number of subordinates and the accomplishments made. Also, while on a journey, each carriage was specifically allocated a particular group of people.

While eating, again, the mercenaries too would too gather together in their own cliques, eating the same foods. Thus, it would be obvious as to which ones had plain foods, and which ones had the luxury food.

That was already the case for mercenaries, who had no interests other than swinging their broadswords, so Kusla could at least predict that those merchants and blacksmiths of different backgrounds would surely be ready to fight to the last breath.

This was a skirmish for the new haven named Kazan.

Kusla ate the warm malt porridge, pondering about these.

The forces moved on smoothly over the first two days, but the chilly weather obviously got harsher. By the 3rd day, it was already snowing in the day, and frigid winds were howling. It was probably too cold that even the chatty mercenaries had masks over their faces, not talking much.

All he could hear the the neighing of the horses, the noises of the wheels, and the little mutters that came from time to time.

But Kusla did heed the advice from Fenesis, and bought a heap of blankets, so he did not feel cold while his body was wrapped under the blankets as

he laid on the loading place. This tranquil environment was also suitable for him to start reading.

Also, whether he was in the town or the workshop, he never actually looked up at the sky.

Even though the sky was the color of lead, looking up at it gave him a sense of liberty.

This journey would take about 2 to 3 weeks. Fenesis had deduced that this journey would be delayed till a month or a month and half due to some mishaps.

But this was not a bad thing.

So Kusla thought.

In the day, Weyland would enthusiastically inspect the equipment of the mercenaries from all over the world, and check on their luggages along with Irine. Fenesis would always cling to her all day, and naturally, she joined in. As a result, Kusla was left alone, reading the book on the loading place, or asking the mercenaries if they heard of legends about strange metals like Orichalcum.

On the way there, the Forces went through a few villages, but as Fenesis said, they were abandoned, and there was no one there. Most likely, they were gone for a long while, and the villages gave a vibe of an empty winter scenery. The buildings were not burned down, so it was unlikely that they were abandoned due to a raid, but that the land was not fertile enough to provide crops, or other reasons that caused the entire to migrate to a city en masse.

And on the 5th day, after dinner, a mercenary said to Kusla,

"Young Lord, the Herald calls for you."

It was inconvenient to read once the sky got dark, so Kusla drank his wine and chatted about various anecdotes from various lands with the mercenaries he got acquainted with. Once he heard the summon, he stood up, and went to the center of the camp.

The Heralding Officer, Alzen, was in the simple living quarters that consisted of merely a tent.

Once the soldiers guarding the tent spotted Kusla, they lifted the curtains to the side.

"You summoned me, sir?"

"So you arrived?"

Alzen said, and looked at Kusla. The tent was unexpectedly warm inside.

There was some wine and dishes laid out on the tape, with a map that was laid down.

Beside him were two thing looking men and a young lieutenant.

"How's the journey so far?"

"Thanks to your care, nothing too inconvenient."

Alzen nodded, and reached his hand out, gesturing for Kusla to sit.

"It may be a little late for me to say this, but that performance of yours in Gulbetty was really an eye opener."

"I aim to please."

Kusla said pretentiously, and Alzen chuckled, leaning his back on the chair.

"I have personally witnessed that your skills are to be trusted, but you do remember the one task I have asked of you, don't you?"

"The wanderers...huh."

Kusla's tone implied that he had just thought of it, but on the way here, the books he had been reading were all about extracting gold. If the wanderers were really prospectors looking for gold. he never intended to let off any crook and nanny.

"Right, tomorrow, our forces will be arriving at a slightly larger town. The Pagans have scattered, and have no intention of resisting, so it's a safe town. We'll rest for a while there before heading to Kazan. We need to get across mountains on the way there, so we'll have to move some of the luggage onto the ships, and deliver them through ship route."

"...Is there anything I can assist with?"

"Yes. Tomorrow, you will be taking another route."

"Another route?"

Kusla could not help but ask, and Alzen pointed a finger at the map on the table, flicking it at Kusla. The latter picked up the map, and scanned it.

"We'll be headed to the sea to the West, and come out from the East side. We'll go by sea, and you'll go by inland."

"To the wanderers?"

"Right. Once you are done with your investigations, you will meet up in the next town on our path."

So that was the case. Kusla understood.

"I understand. However, I am not too used to travelling long distances."

“Of course, they will be coming along with you.”

The two lightly armed men standing beside Alzen silently bowed at Kusla.

“They’re our scouts. According to their reports, the wanderers have shown no strange activity thus far.”

That’s right, isn’t it? He glanced at the men.

And so, they answered,

“They have the authority to hunt in the area by Earl Krasse, and mostly spend their time hunting deer and rabbits. They can move around in the area freely during winter, and will rotate around the various charcoal huts everywhere, once every week.”

“It does feel strange, and yet it doesn’t.”

“This work has a lot of suspicious aspects to it. We won’t be able to detect them if we don’t go down to have a look.”

“So you wish for me to be your eyes?”

“Right. With a capable pair of eyes, my hands will be free.”

This meant that if there was any decent result, he would pay accordingly.

“The Archduke is rather fond of you people.”

“I understand.”

Kusla responded, and then noticed something,

“I have a question.”

“Hm?”

“Am I the only one going to Earl Krasse’s land?”

"Of course. We can't have two 'amazing' alchemists head to the mountains alone. Who knows what'll happen there?"

Even if one got lost and died in the wilderness, there would be another left. *Am I being belittled here?* Kusla wondered, but he immediately changed his mindset, thinking *Got to enter the Tiger's den to catch the cubs.*

"But, to capitalize on every possibility available, I'll let you bring that thing along."

Once he said that, Kusla knew what he was getting at.

"Her ears are good, but I don't know if her nose is the same."

"I'm not asking her to be a swine searching for mushrooms. There should be some strange little similarities between wanderers, but in any case, I'm looking forever to good news from you.

"Understood."

Kusla left Alzen's tent, and once he got outside, a cold breeze met him, causing him to shiver. It seemed even that simple tent was able to shelter from the cold effectively.

He shrugged, and went back to his quarters. On the way back, he found Weyland and Irine checking the armor of a husband and wife pair of blacksmiths, and approached them.

"Found anything interesting?"

"Learned quite a lot."

"I really want to dig up this furnace right now and do all kinds of experiments~"

The surrounding mercenaries could only shrug reluctantly when faced with these two eccentrics, and Fenesis, following by the side, looked reluctant. At first, she was enthusiastically asking questions, but she no longer interrupted their conversation, and could only use the campfire to read a book.

When Kusla approached, she immediately glanced at him, before looking away again.

“What now~ I heard you got summoned by the Herald~”

Your eyes are really sharp, Kusla muttered quietly in his heart.

“I’ll be taking a different route tomorrow.”

“Heh?”

“Probably a shortcut to Magdala.”

Kusla deliberately noted, and Weyland chuckled.

“Watch your step~”

“Really convincing from the fellow who got tripped up in Gulbetty.”

Weyland chuckled, and cautiously put the helmet in his hands into a box.”

“Well, since you’re the only one summoned, are you going alone, Kusla?”

“No. Hey, you’re coming along too.” Kusla shouted at Fenesis.

She was slightly taken aback as she glanced at Kusla, before turning back to reading the book again.

“Is it fine when she’s like this~”

“I’m not going to hold her by the hand.”

Weyland shrugged, "That's how it is." and Kusla added on. He was about to leave the carriage, only to suddenly say to Fenesis.

"Pack up whatever you want to bring along."

Kusla actually wanted to tease her by mentioning raisins, but on second thoughts, it was pointless to agitated her. Also, it would be embarrassing if his teasing got ignored.

At this point, Fenesis never looked at Kusla.

Such a stubborn fellow Kusla noted with some surprise as he walked back to his bed.

The next day, Kusla and Fenesis sat on the carriage the two scouts prepared for them, and went for another route. There would be thick snow as they entered the mountains, so Kusla did his best to prepare some equipment to counter the cold.

His forecast was correct. The uphill road continued on, and the temperature gradually decreased. Everything else other than the wine easily froze up.

The scouts said that Kusla and Fenesis did not have to walk, so they stayed in the carriage obediently and read the books. However, Fenesis chose to sit on the far end from Kusla, the furthest distance away from him even when reading.

Kusla really wanted to ask when did she learn such things, but it would make him look like a child. He could not help but wonder how long this would continue, despite it being interesting.

"Speaking of wanderers, how are they like?"

Kusla asked the scouts on the first night they broke away from the Vanguard.

Kusla's trip was dependent on the two scouts. If he did not talk with them and build up a relationship beforehand, it would be inconvenient if anything was to happen. This was Kusla's concern as he asked.

Though they were different from Fenesis, by chatting and eating together, he would be able to establish an identity of an ally with them. Kusla himself would not be bothered by such things, but he typically had no reservations about manipulating others.

"Just that typical type, no fixed place to stay, survive on hunting or collecting various things to live. Sometimes they'll head to the town to exchange for some coins. It's said that during the cold periods, the females will stay somewhere South, and only the men will wander around in the mountains."

Only men, upon hearing this, Fenesis, who had her head lowered as she nibbled at the gruel, looked a little nervous. However, her expression was unclear, but they were all a little distant from the fire, and she had her hood lowered. Perhaps it was an illusion caused by the flickering fire.

"So those guys are disguised as mercenaries?"

"Can't deny that...but that can be called a destiny of those on the path of wanderers. As long as their superiors request, they will hunt people too."

"That's true."

But despite this, it appeared they had been doing this work for a long time. On one look, they would understand if the wanderers lived on battling for a certain organization.

"If there's anything strange about them, it's their clothing."

"Clothing?"

"They're wearing sheepskin."

"Heh? That's quite the heretical one."

"...I heard you guys performed something of that level in the town?"

One of them asked with a chuckle. Kusla shrugged, and said,

"It is troubling how Alchemists are being so misunderstood."

"Haha. Let's hope that improves."

It appeared these were not bad people.

"But those clothing might be a village culture from somewhere. The sheepskin looks like it can keep them warm, and when hunting, they can hide from the eyes of the beasts. What we're eating now are actually what they gave to us."

One of the scouts scooped out the deer meat in the pot, saying this. Fenesis refused to eat them, and the scouts understood, not forcing the issue.

"We have been watching their actions, and found that the arrows they shoot aren't too accurate. Wearing sheep skin is probably some bait plan to approach their hunt."

That was possible too.

Wanderers moving about on the snowy mountains in sheepskin, verifying the rumors of the fabled golden sheep.

Listening to the circumstances, it might appear that they attracted strange hypothesis due to their somewhat unique fashion.

"You have been reading books on gold, haven't you? Any clues?"

"Not for the time being. But if I got something, the reward will be really worth it, thus I'm trying my best."

"We look forward to getting some glory too."

The scouts said, and gently raised their cups to toast.

Kusla drank the astringent wine, and stared at Fenesis.

He did not find any clues, but what about her?

During that incident involving Weyland, she found an illustration depicting an ancient fable, and thought of a ludicrous strategy. Thus, she probably did some intensive research with regards to the fable.

Given her personality, if she knew something, she probably would show it somehow in her attitude.

But though he had such a thought, Kusla could not observe her, probably because of the flickering fire, or because her body was hidden in the hood of her coat.

"Looks like it'll be snowing tonight too."

The scout muttered, and Kusla could not help but shiver.

By the time they were done with dinner, the sun had set completely, and Kusla hurriedly buried his body under the blanket. This could barely keep himself protected from the cold, but he was still used to the comfortable lifestyle of the workshop. While he was wondering what he should get to keep himself warmer, he thought of Fenesis in his subconsciousness. He remembered that when he moved her away when she was asleep, her body

was really warm. With that soft body of hers, he inadvertently thought of a warming tool made by pouring hot water into a gourd.

He remembered that when she first came to the workshop, he told her to sleep on the bed, but she chose to sleep on the floor instead, and snuggled inside the blanket to warm her trembling body. At this point, Kusla had his head buried inside the cheap blanket, the animal and moldy stenches stinging at his nostrils little by little. On the other hand, Fenesis typically had a sweet fragrance oozing off her. Kusla wondered if they were mammary scents, but there was none in the workshop, and she always had this scent on her.

If he cuddled Fenesis to sleep, perhaps he would be having a nice sleep. He would take the opportunity to answer a few questions, and tease her from time to time. For Weyland, he would be happy seeing a girl smile at him; for Kusla himself, he would be happy upon seeing a girl pout.

However, till this point, Fenesis still refused to look at him, let alone say anything to him; if there was something she did not understand, she would not ask him, and instead check on other books quietly. She would not raise any questions to Kusla, and while the latter was astonished at her stubbornness, he started to get anxious. *If you ask, I would have taught you,* Kusla himself started to have such anxious thoughts. Surely she was rubbing it in his face by reading books with Irine and Weyland. Kusla too knew that he should have just ignored such immature antics, but this anxiety was harassing him like a mosquito, and he could not shake it off.

Perhaps he should simply tell her that it was he who saved Weyland...

What foolish things am I thinking? By the time he noticed, it was already dawn.

He laid under the clear winter sky, and sneezed, as though reproaching his ludicrous thoughts.

There was an important mountain range between the Pagan lands including Kazan, and the land of Orthodoxy including Gulbetty, and the area was owned by the Earl Krasse. On the afternoon two days later, Kusla and company arrived at the mountain fort.

The snow was too thick, and even Kusla had to get off the carriage to push it down the road.

It was said the snow was heavier than prior years, and typically, the snow would not be this thick.

Stepping through the snow, they entered this Earl's fort, and welcoming them were the wanderers they were to invigilate.

It seemed this job was not to be done stealthily, but brazenly.

It was said that the Earl himself stayed at a fortress somewhere downhill that was more suitable for living, and that in fact, the wanderers were the ones watching the place. The wanderers ancestors probably had some dealings with the Earl, and the latter probably had them manage and repair the fort in the snowy winter, the compensation in turn was that they could hunt freely in the area.

However, it would be a striking difference from the assumption that they were prospectors hired by the Earl to look for gold. If they had been dealing with the Earl for a very long time, they would have began searching for gold a long time back.

There was a likelihood that the Earl deliberately gave them a privilege, giving a false assumption that they had a give-and-take relationship.

Kusla quietly muttered himself that he should never let any clue slip through.

“Oh, some strange guests this time.”

The wanderers certainly looked peculiar. There were 6 of them, their faces and bodies squarish in shape. Perhaps they were tribe members, blood related.

At this point, the wanderers were not wearing the sheepskins the scouts reported.

They were wearing extremely ordinary clothing for a mountainous tribe.

“Building a furnace in the mountains?”

The reason why their faces looked so similar was probably because they all had similarly shaped beards. They had thick black beards from the noses to below the chins.

“This pretty one here is here to grace us with God’s teachings.”

The wanderers never felt intimidated when they saw Kusla and the others, and in fact, were jovial in their tones as they approached.

They were akin to goats, shamelessly begging for food.

“We’re bothered by this too, but this is an order from the Knights. Our apologies from causing you trouble for this period.”

“Hahaha. Our way of life is a little unique. We understand.”

One of them, the leader of the wanderers said, "I'm Caldoz.", and reached his hand out to shake with Kusla. The latter grabbed it, and felt that hand was really firm, the hand of someone who toiled hard at labor.



"In any case, it is better to have more people up in the mountains. The fortress has been kept tidy to welcome the Earl back. Please, come in."

Saying that, Caldoz brought Kusla and the others around in this fortress opened in the mountains. The rest mentioned that they had repair works to do, and went on their ways.

Besides the two scouts who reported to the Herald, there were another two scouts continuing their surveillance in the fort. Kusla however sensed that they were not as light on armor as the two he went with. They had burly physiques, and certainly could be useful for battle in case it did happen. Alzen probably thought of eliminating all witnesses if the plan regarding the wanderers got revealed.

But even so, Kusla thought.

Despite this invigilation being up close instead of being discreet, and skeptical eyes cast on them, the wanderers did not seem to mind. They probably were bold in nature, or as Caldoz mentioned, that they lived such a lifestyle, and it was common for the Knights or those in authority to give them skeptical looks.

Those people might be similar to us in that sense, Kusla thought.

"Typically, all of us squeeze together in a room to sleep. Shall I prepare the Earl's wife bedroom for you? There is a little furnace there for warming.

That question was directed at Fenesis.

And the latter stammered, either because she was hesitant, or because the cold numbed her tongue. Thus, Kusla answered instead.

"No need for that."

Fenesis, hidden under that hood, was probably displeased about Kusla speaking up before she could, rather than desiring a room to herself.

"I don't know whether I can trust those people from the Knights either, so don't leave me."

Kusla stated calmly; he did not tease her, and had no intention of doing so. Fenesis did not react.

Despite this, given that she had experience living as a wanderer, she probably would not try anything funny.

"I heard you normally go out hunting. Did you stay in the fort just to welcome us?"

Caldoz led Kusla and the others to the hall where everyone slept at, and Kusla asked,

"No, as you can see, we're drying sheep hide today."

The wood was burning wildly in the furnace of the hall, and there was a row of sheep hide laid out in front of it.

It was assumed that the hides would be like an ordinary coat, but unexpectedly there were heads on them.

Kusla seemed to understand why the wanderers attracted such skepticism from the Knights. It would be expected for others to assume something was strange if someone was to wander around in the mountains, wearing such things.

"We have to wash these sheepskin once or twice or week and dry them. If they get human smell on them, it'll scare those beasts."

"I see. So you're resting."

"You can say so. However, when we aren't hunting, we're repairing the fort."

Caldoz shrugged his wide shoulders, his head ostensibly buried between them. He appeared to be a very honest wanderer.

Kusla had such a preemptive thought, and shook his head.

"I shall be continuing with the repairs. About the situation with the fort..."

"My comrades will explain the details later."

Caldoz nodded with a grin, and walked away.

Kusla scanned the luggage and sheepskins in the room.

"It's like an inn."

"You can hear the fleas jumping when you sleep."

A scout joked.

And Kusla sensed that Fenesis, who had cat-like ears, froze up immediately.

One of the scouts brought Kusla and Fenesis to a parked carriage outside.

Unlike the carriage Kusla and the others rode on, this belonged to the wanderers, and they wanted to investigate.

"Rather crude."

"There's a whole lot more nails than usual. I guess that's to be expected though; they live a wandering lifestyle, so a sturdier carriage can save them a lot of trouble."

The wanderers' carriage were reinforced with iron, so it would not look out of place in a battlefield. There were two horses standing in front of it, probably because it was too heavy.

"Lots of goods too."

"Checked them?"

"Doesn't look like anything a prospector would have. Just food and clothes, and the tools and materials used to repair a carriage."

Kusla took off the cloth covering it, and found oil, salt, meat jerky, fruits, onions, food well suited for preserving over long periods, and a lot of fur goods. These were the things Fenesis mentioned in the market.

If one were to compare the difference between these things and the ones Kusla bought, it would be obvious that these things were actually used over long periods of time, during actual travel.

Kusla was increasingly impressed, feeling as though he had witnessed the tools a blacksmith favored.

"Where are the tools?"

"Placed somewhere else."

Kusla wondered for a while, *as to be expected of them.*

He was about to break away from the scouts who led him, and glanced aside at Fenesis, finding that she was staring intently at the purple-eyed horses. Such horses might be really rare.

"You'll get nibbled at."

Fenesis was taken aback, and inadvertently retreated.

The horse neighed gently, *No I won't*. as though saying this.

"We aren't experts, but we did meet some prospectors in the mountains a few times, so we do think that we understand them a little."

"To be honest, prospecting is similar to our work."

They entered a storeroom, and found bows, arrows, swords and a full set of weapons. Those probably belonged to Earl Krasse.

There was also a straw mat on the floor, with a bunch of tools laid out.

"But these tools don't appear to be used for mining gold or silver..."

"Even with our invigilation, we got nothing. They basically hunt, or repair the fort and the furnace, or as you can see, wash the sheepskin. We wanted to spy on them stealthily, actually. Then it'll be easier for them to slip up."

"I thought you would be spying on them in the dark."

"If we did so, we might be misunderstood for being hostile to the landowner. Most importantly, the snow is too thick, and our bodies can't last."

"Right..."

Kusla nodded, and turned back to look behind. Fenesis looked nonchalant as she squat down, touching those tools.

"Did they use a board when washing the sheepskin?"

"Board?"

"Right. You showed me a map when we came here. There are a lot of rivers nearby, so maybe they are pretending to wash the sheepskin, but in fact, they are checking if they can harvest gold sand. Wooden boards with

grooves are used for harvesting gold dust. Gold is denser than other rocks, and they sink into the grooves easily.

"No...they never used such a thing."

The scout said despondently.

"Well, that's one possibility."

Kusla noted nonchalantly. He noticed the picture on one of the cloth wrapped on a tool. Though the picture was vague as the dyed fibers had faded in color, but it was obvious that there was a sheep there.

At the very least, the rumors relating to a golden sheep was not a lie.

"But in that case, I might be worrying too much."

"They probably hid the tools."

"Or maybe, they determined based on the color of the earth and plants."

Is that possible too? The scouts were shocked. However, Kusla merely raised his hands to his shoulders, surrendering, and said,

"Of course, if they did that, we got nothing. It'll be a different case though if there are other evidences. Even if we do pry their heads open, we won't be able to see their thoughts."

"It's true...that we can't tie them up and interrogate them. They have a permit, and we can't be violent towards them."

Kusla nodded.

Earl Krasse and the wanderers were the manager and caretakers of this defensive stronghold of a fort.

If the wanderers were innocent, arbitrarily enacting violence on them would bring about unnecessary enemies for the Knights in this land filled with Pagans.

"Well, there's still enough time to investigate. We got other things to do here."

Kusla said, and the scouts could only return with wry smiles.

"But I never expected that an alchemist and a nun would come here."

One of the wanderers raised a mug of wine, saying this,

The sunset arrived early in the winter mountains.

There were benefits to treating the inn-like hall as living quarters, as everyone was using the furnace \\ to cook the food they brought, drinking wine together, and if they wanted to sleep, they could simply shrivel on the spot.

If Weyland were around, he would certainly be overjoyed.

"We live together in the same workshop."

Kusla answered without hesitation, only to have pricked their interests as their eyes widened.

"Hey. You people are from the town, right?"

"Are you moving around everywhere in this world? You've probably seen all kinds of intriguing things in the towns."

"Hahaha. It's true that when I was younger, I thought of venturing all over the world."

"That's probably the time when you married your wife."

"Soon after, I bitterly experienced how vast this world is, and regretted it."

The wanderers guffawed upon saying that.

They probably started wandering ever since they were born. One person spoke, and followed by another, and it repeated over and over again as the conversation continued on,

After finishing the deer and mushroom stew, everyone else held mugs of distilled wine and light wine. Fenesis was terrified of strangers, and was in the midst of met, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

"In life, we often encounter some very rare, strange things. It's because of this that we feel that one day, we'll find the golden sheep."

Caldoz, the eldest of the wanderers, said as he drank his wine.

It appeared the fable of the golden sheep was not just a rumor, but from them.

"Sorry to dampen your enthusiasm though."

Kusla said,

"Anyway, the fable of the golden sheep is basically the nostalgia the ancients assumed plants to be gold and silver, right?"

Hearing this, the wanderers gave each other gleeful looks, and Caldoz continued, "We'll like to hear more."

"Typically, gold is extracted from gold ores or lead ores. However, there are some cases of gold, silver and bronze found in pure forms. Leaving aside the possibilities of beautiful crystals, sometimes, they are buried in the

ground at the roots of the trees or some strange mushrooms. Thus, the alchemists of the past thought that gold and silver were plants."

"I see?"

"But after 30 years of observation, we got reports that the amounts of gold and silver never increased. Of course, they never grew, and at the same time, never wilted.

"In other words, the wool of the golden sheep would probably be something similar."

"As a pragmatic person, this is my view too."

"Ooh."

One of the wanderers widened his eyes, and stroked his beard.

"We have little money ourselves, and have a different explanation to this."

"Our ancestors were originally shepherds. One day, they spotted some sheeps with fur they never saw before, and successfully raised them. They then brought the sheeps to the king, who then let them multiply, and created a wealthy country built on selling sheepskin , and wanted to reward our ancestors. Our ancestors then acquired enough money for their grandchildren to spend for a lifetime."

"Some fools then wanted to try their luck, and went out searching for the golden sheeps. Those fools he mentioned probably refers to us."

The tone was candid, probably due to the wine.

Upon hearing the end, Fenesis coughed a little.

"But us having dreams isn't a bad thing, I suppose."

"I guess we're able to endure the harsh winter because there might be a herd of golden sheep on the other side of the mountains."

The wanderers said this with a smile, but there was a forlorn feeling of those without a permanent dwelling place.

Thus, Kusla could not bring himself to simply laugh it off.

For what they said was the ideal for Magdala.

Those without a hometown needed not comfort, nor condolences.

But a dazzling goal that deterred them from turning back.

"I think I said too much."

Upon hearing Kusla's apology, Caldoz started to indulge in wine.

"Why, my wife was harsher with that, saying that it's about time I should be throwing out this done and dusted fable. A better saying would have been that I'm really fond of this gold and silver growing story."

And Caldoz's words caused the wanderers to laugh cheerfully.

They continued drinking and chatting until late at night.

Fenesis was probably worn out by the long journey, or her interest was piqued by the cheerful conversation as she drank too much, and she soon leaned on Kusla and fell asleep. It appeared that, between leaving from Kusla while being in the midst of men, and her disgust at Kusla, she felt more repulsed by the notion of being alone.



And right when Kusla wanted to stand up, she woke up.

“Go to sleep. Need me to hug you?”

A sleepy Fenesis was about to continue sleeping as Kusla told her to, but she got sober.

It was a mystery as to whether she wanted to give a look of disgust, or that she wanted to rein in her sleepiness, but in any case, she sat upright with a grouchy face, rubbed her eyes, and stumbled as she stood up.

“Where are you going?”

Kusla could not help but ask as she teetered towards the door, but she merely gave him a displeased look.

Given her reaction however, he understood that she had something she needed to do.

“She’s at that difficult age, huh?”

One of the wanderers said.

Surely he too had a daughter of a similar age.

“I had a quarrel with her before I came here, but she still can’t differentiate between which things will get serious, and which things she should be seriously thinking about. That’s the source of my troubles.”

“Hahaha. I see.”

Kusla shrugged, and said,

“I’ll be bothered if she’s to drop off a cliff. I’ll check on her.”

Once Kusla exited the hall, he found a cold that was about to rip his body apart. The moon outside was pretty, and the bluish-white light shining

through the gap in the wooden window shone in. It appeared as though one could grab it just by reaching out.

Kusla once actually thought that the place where beams of moonlight shone upon a spot was the sword of Orichalcum, and that romantic notion would probably fluster even a poet.

Even I had a past when I dreamt often, huh.

He did not know where Fenesis went, but soon after, he found her at the well in the atrium, wondering how to scoop out the water.

“Still groggy?”

Kusla called out, and Fenesis jolted in shock, dropping the bucket. The rope tied to the bucket fell into the well, but there was no sound of water, and instead, a hard thud of solid objects clashing could be heard.

“In such cold weather, the well water’s frozen, right?”

“...”

“If you want water, there’s another place. Come.”

Kusla walked off, and Fenesis hesitated a little, but was unable to overcome her thirst as she followed Kusla unwillingly.

“Look.”

They were in a stone fortress, which might be colder than the outside. Kusla pried open the lid of a wooden tub in the kitchen, hammered the ice on the surface with a ladle, and used it to scoop water for her.

Fenesis received the ladle, initially worried that it was poisoned, took a sip, and then kept gulping it down, even choking on it. She then wanted another scoop from Kusla.

“Are you awake now?”

Kusla asked, and Fenesis was caught off guard, choking on the water.

Even with the bluish-white moonlight shining on her face, it was obvious that she was blushing.

“Still angry?”

After a while, she looked at Kusla.

“Even if you’re angry, it won’t change anything.”

Kusla said as he took a chip of ice, and put it into his mouth.”

“Now then, don’t you feel that it isn’t worth it?”

“Like you.”

Fenesis swallowed back what she was about to say, and again, she slowly spoke,

“I do not think doing things like you breaking the ice like that.”

“Are you saying that all the irrational aspects of this world is like this ice?”

In response to Kusla’s words, Fenesis lowered her head.

It was not that she did not understand, that she did not comprehend, or that she never learned from her experiences.

But despite this, she still yearned for good people on this world.

“Only by acting like ‘Interest’ am I able to weave my way through this world. I have my destination, no room for failure.”

“But...you ruined what I wanted to break.”

Fenssis tried to argue back.

She really was like a child being impudent, but she could actually break the irrational aspects of this world without care for her own safety.

"You know that there are alchemists like that too. They're different from Weyland and me, they think they can turn lead into gold by using burnt black newts or frog eyes. What you're doing now is very similar to them."

Despite having a goal, it was impossible not to have mistakes in the rationale of working towards a goal. However, acts of despair were certainly a no-go.

Kusla sighed.

"I thought you should be smarter."

Hearing Kusla's words, Fenesis, with her head lowered, spoke up,

"I..."

"Hm?"

"I thought you would be someone kinder."

White mist came out from her mouth, probably due to the heat as she muttered, and it vanished under the moonlight.

Fenesis wanted a beautified impression of Kusla.

How exactly did Irine describe this about her?

Well, it doesn't matter, Kusla thought.

"Sorry, but if kindness is what I need to head to Magdala, I would have showed it without hesitation. If I need to abandon it, I'll do it too."

"..."

Fenesis lifted her head, and stared at Kusla sadly.

She then averted her eyes weakly.

It was meaningless, so she might have thought.

“But my actual intent wasn’t to be hated by you.”

Kusla said that with a straight face, and Fenesis kept coughing incessantly.

Her expression was akin to someone who witnessed a mischievous child, and was left completely speechless.

“You are a strange one.”

“I’m ‘Kusla’. Looks like I won’t be able to integrate well with people on this world.”

“...”

Fenesis averted her eyes, and slowly let out a breath.

It seemed she wanted to say something next, but in the end, she kept quietly.

“Hm? Well, in any case, you’re willing to talk to me now. I might as well say something to you first.”

Fenesis took a deep breath, and asked,

“What is it?”

“You know the reason why we’re sent here, don’t you?”

“...Yes.”

“Then, once you return to the hall, don’t sleep for the time being.”

“Eh?”

"Keep your ears pricked. You tried eavesdropping on my conversations with Weyland, didn't you? Your hearing abilities are rather astounding. If those guys are trying to hide something, they might communicate amongst their buddies. You were brought along to counter this."

"..."

While Fenesis remained dull in her response, Kusla asked,

"Do you understand?"

Fenesis suddenly gave a smile that was really uneasy, and it looked as though she was about to burst into tears at any given moment.

"Hm?"

Kusla was shocked. Fenesis took a deep breath, and let out a white sigh,

"You always are 'Interest' no matter what."

This time, Kusla finally understood what Fenesis was trying to say.

"You want me to apologize to you and beg for forgiveness?"

"More importantly, what I want to say that you might feel enraged and force me to."

"I am different from that level of inhumanity. At the very least, I still have such understanding."

In fact, the reason why Kusla went off to save Weyland was because he did not want to be forced into shackling Fenesis by the neck and drag her along."

"I see...in fact, you are 'Kusla'. An Alchemist obsessed with Magdala at any given moment."

Kusla watched Fenesis, who was staring back at him.

"That is the case."

"...Understood. Anything else I need to do?"

Kusla stared at Fenesis with some surprise, given her sudden improvement in comprehensive ability.

But since she asked, he could only answer.

He had a lot to say, but in the end, all he could only say was this,

"Anything you don't know about your investigations, ask me."

Even in his dreams, those were the words he wanted to say.

It appeared he really wanted to teach her.

Fenesis stared at Kusla calmly.

And then, she suddenly let out a sigh, giving an awkward smile.

The next day, the wanderers went into the mountains with sheepskin draped on.

And the two scouts naturally followed suit.

Of course, the wanderers knew very well that they were observers, but the Knights had their own objectives. Even if the wanderers were innocents, this action would give an impression of 'we're watching'.

The Knights, hailed as unprecedented in the vastness of their rule, solidified their existence through the accumulation of such forceful methods.

And for alchemists like Kusla, the Knights were an organization they could not offend.

"But this is really peculiar."

Kusla muttered to himself, and the breath he let out became white mist that blocked his vision, vanishing in the snowy mountains.

His eyes gathered at the prostrated men in sheepskin. They were staring at two deer in front of him, the two animals not noticing them as they chewed on the ark.

One of the prostrated wanderers readied his bow.

From Kusla's position, it was impossible to tell if the two deer were on their guard.

The two skinny scouts who brought Kusla along were standing not too far away from him, playing with their bows and arrows.

Unfolding in front of him was a scene of the wanderers' hunt.

There were not 6, but 7 sheepskin prostrated on the snowy ground, and this was the reason why Kusla was here. Fenesis, who would have likely said, "I don't want to see something as cruel as hunting", indicated that she wanted to go hunting with the wanderers. The latter group, led by Caldoz, said it was fine with grins on their faces, but Kusla was skeptical, not knowing her real intents.

And while Kusla did not really know much about hunting, he was worried that Fenesis might slip on the mountains, or accidentally expose her ears when chasing after prey. However, KFenesis whispered something to Kusla.

If I'm close to them, I think I'll be able to hear their words.

That was what Kusla was referring to when he said it was peculiar.

Regarding the ears, Fenesis probably had two handkerchiefs wrapped under her two ; of course, this also had the purpose of shielding from the cold.

And about hunting, the two scouts did say that the hunting was not that intense, so there was no need to worry.

But despite this, Kusla was a little worried, and followed suit.

“Pew...!”

At this moment, a sharp sound rang.

It was the first time he had ever heard of such a sound, and he hurriedly looked over at the source, only to see the two deer running out.

The prostrated men stood up in unison, and at the same time, raised 6 bows, pulled themm, and fired at the deer running downhill. However, the two deer went sprinting, and the arrows missed the one after another, landing behind them. During this time, the deer continued sprinting, and darted down the other end of the snowy mountain, where the trees were sparse in numbers, towards a thick forest.

Kusla had assumed that the hunt had failed, but one arrow flew by the head of the wanderers, hitting a deer right in the eye as though it was sucked in. The arrow stabbed into the side of the deer’s head was like a bent horn, and it slowed down, tumbled another 2, 3 steps, its head swayed as it fell immediately.

The remaining deer wandered around the edge of the forest, looking back at its friend, and then, after dithering for a while, it ran deep into the forest.

“Oh, I got it.”

The scout maintained the posture of an archer as he noted nonchalantly. And the men in sheepskin turned around, flailing their bows and arrows jokingly in protest of the scout stealing their kill.

The wanderers drained the blood off the deer, took out the organs, buried it, and left only the liver.

They wrapped the meat in leaves, and held down the hide with stones. The horns, and even the bones and meat were carefully sliced up and washed with snow. Kusla had assumed Fenesis would have been terrified seeing such work, but she was actually happily helping Caldoz.

When it was lunch, the wanderers brought the deer meat and liver they hunted into a boiling cauldron of salt water, and served yoghurt, bread and some malt wine, forming a little feast.

“Goodness gracious, you were able to hit from that far? How are we supposed to compare?”

One of the wanderers had some banter with the scout who shot the deer, and the scout humbly replied that he was able to get that perfect position because everyone was shooting at the deer.

To a certain extent, that might be true, but given that he was someone hired by the Knights, he might be a famous hunter from somewhere in the land. Kusla did not do anything in this hunt, but he naturally helped himself to the rare deer meat and liver. It was a rare opportunity to have deer meat in the town, let alone deer liver. He once heard that the taste of the deer liver would be enough to get people addicted. Fenesis refused to eat meat, and only drank some soup with deer liver taste, but this was already delicious.

Kusla felt that perhaps Fenesis knew that it was a rare lunch to get from a hunt. Also, he had an impression that it was not the first time he witnessed a deer being slaughtered, that she knew the process, understood what she should do, and what she could.

Again, he firmly emphathized that she was once someone who lived outside the towns.

A deer was massive enough, and so the wanderers never tried killing a second one. Once they were done eating, they returned to the fort. Kusla too helped bring the meat back, for at the very leasts, he wanted to contribute somewhat.

Once they returned, the wanderers laid out a mat in the atrium, spread the meat on it, and sliced it into finer pieces. The remaining people brought the meat to a sunny place, or stuffed it into a vat, to be preserved in salt.

Fenesis too went to help with the work, and she went about doing it with her sleeves rolled up, the usually white skin on her arms completely red.

Her strange enthusiasm left Kusla shrugging reluctantly, but he had no intention of helping, nor did he have any intention of watching on.

He went back to his own work, to check on the belongings of the wanderers.

“No vinegar or touchstone to be seen...”

Kusla could not find any distilled vinegar that would be used to analyze certain minerals, or a touchstone that could test the purity of a gold ore by rubbing on it. He even went to the kitchen to rummage through the utensils and food, but found nothing of note.

Perhaps the myth about the Golden Sheep was as they said, just a mere moment of solace for them in this plain, boring world. Kusla scanned the kitchen silently, and could vaguely hear the people processing the deer meat from afar.

At this moment, he sensed someone approaching, and turned around to look, finding at it was Caldoz. The latter's hands were reddened from the cold and the meat.

"Wew, it's really cold out there."

Saying that, Caldoz took up a wine bottle in the cabinet.

"Found what you wanted to look for?"

It was unknown if such joking words were probing at something.

"Will save me a lot of effort if you can hand it over."

"Hahaha. I'll just let you investigate everything thoroughly since you're sent to such a distant area."

Caldoz probably wanted to get a few more mugs, as he proceeded to collect 6 of them, wondering whether he should take a 7th, before he suddenly turned around to look Kusla.

"Speaking of which, that young lady is a strange one."

Kusla merely shrugged at those words.

"I never met a nun who would help carve up deer meat. However, I heard she was once a wanderer."

Once those words were said, Caldoz proceeded to reach for a 7th mug.

Fenesis is one of us. Such an intent was implied in his action.

"I don't know the details, but it's said that she's born near the promised land."

"Hoh, Culdaros? That's quite a distant place. Even we never seen that land before."

Caldoz happily continued on,

"But though that are good things about wandering everywhere, there are bad things too. It's pain."

His smiling face seemed to be reminiscing something.

What his eyes gazed upon were probably the hardships only a wanderer would know of. Kusla, who lived in the towns, sheltered by the Knights, would never know.

It was uninteresting to Kusla.

"You don't want to continue living such a harsh life?"

When Kusla said this, he noticed that his words included the meaning of 'Fenesis is of Caldoz's ilk'.

"It'll take courage to change something that has been done over a long time. However, it doesn't seem like a bad thing to wait again."

"...?"

"Because, before we change, the world shall change."

Kusla stared at Caldoz with a skeptical look, and the latter continued chuckling as he continued,

"Do you not know? No, this can be considered a rumor. I heard that soon after, the long war will end soon after."

"War?"

Kusla in turn asked, *What folly is this?* he wondered.

This war was originally started because the Pope, at the apex of the religion, declared that he wanted to retake the promised land from the Pagans.

However, it had been 20 years of back and forth in this war. During this time, the flames continued to spread. The call for a crusade to retake the Holy Lands from the pagans started amongst the people, and it was to be expected that the warring spread everywhere.

In this turbulent world, strange organizations like the Knights, unable to be deemed countries, continued to expand its influence, and engulf the world by capitalizing on the war. Like the Church, they existed in every town, ruling the world with things easier to understand than the God the Church preached, swords and gold.

No matter how he thought about this, Kusla never could imagine the warring factions, led by the Knights, would stop when they relied on the war against the pagans to accumulate their power.

However, Caldoz probably got increasingly enthusiastic about this, as he continued with something more preposterous.

"The Queen of Latria shall convert to Orthodoxy soon."

Kusla decided not to latch on to this strange topic.

He stared at Caldoz intently, and the latter seemed embarrassed.

"Ah, pardon me. Having wandered around for my entire life, I started to like rumors."

"...How far has this rumor spread?"

Kusla asked, neither agreeing nor denying this rumor, merely expressing his concern.

It would be impossible to spread such volatile rumors in the towns discreetly, with eyes everywhere and many watchmen.

An Alchemist is a bird in a cage, and thus, unfamiliar with the rumors outside the town.

“Only heard of it recently.”

The wanderer’s words were just a random topic, but Kusla recalled the conversation with the vanguard mercenaries when he went with them. He recalled them saying the war was about to come to an end.

But if that was the case, the fall of Kazan and this migration would be Kusla’s last chance for the New World, and thus, he had to work hard.

But in the end, the rumor basically implied that the Orthodox lost the chance to invade the Pagans.

Thus, Kusla assumed the war would continue on.

But if the war that encompassed the world was a crusade against the Pagans, naturally, it would not continue on forever.

No matter the farmland, once the produces were harvested, everything would end. Thus, the war that lasted for years might meet its end if the Queen of Latria converted.

“In that case, the Knights will be through tough times now, right?”

Caldoz probably sensed that he spoke for a long time once he was done, put down a mug in his hands, and poured out one for Kusla.

"Tough? It does seem surreal to think that the war will be over..but if the war ends, the Knights can focus on the path of money making they wanted, right?"

Filled in the mug was cheap wine that was a stark contrast to the clear wine. There was some ginger, lime, alum, honey and anything to mask the flavor. This wine was probably squeezed out from grape, and the remaining residue was again squeezed out weakly. It was obvious that there was a lot of residue inside.

"You need to drink this wine through your teeth. Not suited for town folk."

Caldoz said, and took a gulp, turning to the kitchen window, and spat the residue out.

Kusla had a little sip; it was sour, with some overwhelming sweetness, and completely covered with a layer of bitterness, acrid. Like Caldoz, he learned to spit the residue out.

"Where were we again?"

"About the Knights having a tough time once the war ends."

"Oh, right. You should know well, don't you? Once the war ends, a lot of things will be unnecessary."

Kusla looked over at Caldoz, and the latter did not seem to have any malicious intent.

"It does make sense."

"Without any war, there isn't a need for so much iron. Many metalworkers and miners will lose their jobs. Of course, there won't be any need for wars to seek mines, and nobody to observe strange folks like us."

“...”

It appeared Caldoz had accurately comprehended the sort of skepticism he was under.

But despite this, he continued to drink nonchalantly, filtering the remains through his teeth, and spat them out.

“Without the purpose of a crusade ‘to fight against the Pagans’, there will be a drastic change in the world. We often ventured outside the towns, so we’re able to easily grasp the movements of such changes. However, if we let them slip, we’ll be toppled like a lone boat drifting in the currents, and that’s why we have to do our best.”

It was the case.

Kusla drank the inferior wine, and thought,

What is the purpose of this man saying such a thing? Just out of boredom, or?

“But without the war, we might not be able to continue repairing the fort for the Earl like this and get our hunting ground. We might have to find a new residence.”

It appeared he just wanted to vent his anxieties for the uncertain future to anyone.

Though Kusla had such a notion, it did not seem to be the case.

Perhaps Kusla’s heart did falter a little.

Once the war ended, a lot of jobs would be unnecessary?

However, Kusla merely chuckled, and said as though he was trying to say this to himself,

“But even as the world changes, our way of life won’t.”

“Haha. That is how it is. Especially us, being toyed by the cruelty of the world, continue to trudge on without relenting, and that’s why we’re able to reach our destination.”

“All we can only do is to pray, at the very least...at least, we know our destination exists.”

Kusla said with some lingering emotions.

Caldoz bared his teeth that were stained with traces of grapeskin, and laughed without sounding out.

“Of course. And that is why there is the allure of some detour road that makes us think ‘maybe that road is the right one’. Maybe it is this kind of allure that creates the rumor that ‘maybe the world is changing’...”

Caldoz rattled off, and continued happily.

Kusla shrugged.

“Whenever we feel lost and stray off course, we’ll be stranded in danger, huh.”

In other words, like Fenesis?

“Of course, that is how it is.”

The world itself was uncertain. In such a world, they would have to move forward towards a destination that might not exist, and could only identify this road and head forth.

For no matter the friction or conflict that might come to happen by this action, it was the only compass they could believe in.

If only Fenesis could understand this in the future.

"But anyway, this wine really is terrible."

"...Is it possible to improve this with alchemy?"

Kusla shrugged, and Caldoz guffawed, spitting out the grape remains.

The next day, Caldoz and the others went out hunting. Fenesis naturally followed suit, and as it appeared the hunting was not that dangerous, Kusla did not follow them out.

Furthermore, he was curious about what Caldoz said, and wanted to ponder over it.

If the war ended, the world would change drastically.

At that moment, how would he continue on?

However, what Caldoz said about Latria's Queen converting soon was just baseless rumors, and that he was worrying too much.

If he were to consider that this might actually happen, would it really be useful?

And even if the war ended, human desires would not vanish. No matter the times, wealth was associated closely with metals and gemstones, while the ones who specialized in dealing with such things were the Alchemists.

Perhaps the job scope might change at that moment, but the lives of Kusla and the others probably would not change drastically.

While Kusla weighed in on this matter, the sun was about to set. The hunters had returned.

After leaving Gulbetty, Kusla's group had been travelling around on carriages, through mountains and ridges to this fort, and Fenesis went hunting for 2 days strange. She, who hardly had much physical energy, was looking exceptionally weary.

However, the two times she went hunting allowed her to be familiar with Caldoz and the others. With their encouragement, she managed to make it back to the hall, and once she got back in, she collapsed to the ground, which left the group guffawing. It she was amused by them, and started laughing too.

After a little rest, Fenesis took off her snow covered clothes and shoes, brought them to dry in front of the furnace, and went to assist in making dinner. At this point, she was more hardworking than she was in the workshop at Gulbetty.

Just the night two days ago, Kusla told her to stay by the wanderers, to collect information about them, and to reveal their secret. This display of enthusiasm from her was probably an extension from that job.

That should typically be the case, but Kusla felt that it was different.

The next day, again, Fenesis went hunting with them happily, and came back before sunset. Once he saw this, Kusla finally realized the source of that discomfort.

When Fenesis was amongst the wanderers, she appeared to be really delighted. During the incident in Gulbetty, Fenesis simply would not give up on Weyland, and Kusla did not feel that such a person would not be so happy when spying.

Kusla did suspect that it was an act, but he did not think she was that capable. She was the type of person to put up a posture whenever she could

not beat Kusla in an argument. Either that, or she would put up a front and say some preposterous things. Even if she was a little capable, it was certainly insufficient for her to be able to act.

Kusla wondered, and soon, found himself lost in his thoughts.

Fenesis probably recalled about the past.

During the times when she was wandering in the southeastern lands, living the life of a wanderer along with her tribe.

And so, on the 5th evening at the fort.

Like usual, the wanderers came back from their hunt, and went off separately to prepare dinner. Out of curiosity, Fenesis gave a grim look, and called Kusla out. The latter had a faint idea of what Fenesis wanted to say.

“You want to ask what will happen to those people, right?”

The sunset over the horizon of a flatland was a bright crimson, but in the mountains, the sunset sky looked blue probably because it was closer.

Kusla felt the wine was horrible, but this taste was something he was addicted to. He continued drinking, and asked Fenesis.

“If they did not have any issues, it’ll be fine. The higher-ups will probably just leave them be.”

“...If not?”

It was obvious what she was worried about.

“They’ll either be imprisoned, splintered, or become watchdogs for the Knights.”

“!”

Fenesis opened the wooden window of the fort's corridor, bit her lips, and looked out at the mountains that were gradually dyed with the hue of night.

"You found something?"

Fenesis slowly shook her head.

However, her movements were a little stiff, probably for some reason.

"You might think of me as a fool again."

"Worried about their futures, huh?"

Having worked together with the wanderers, and recalling her prior life of escapes, Fenesis was hoping that the wanderers could continue living the life she could not continue living, and live a peaceful life. It was also probably she was once dragged into this unreasonable fate, and about to drag others into this unreasonable fate herself.

"I do think you are foolish."

Kusla calmly stated. Fenesis sighed, and said,

"...Just as lead becomes gold, by looking from different perspectives, the world is completely different."

"You understand that well."

Kusla calmly stated. With a long sigh, Fenesis continued,

"Those people know about me."

Hearing that, Kusla inadvertently jolted from the wall he was leaning on.

"Hey, this."

"I told him about the bloodline, and how our tribe went around escaping."

The immaturity vanished from Fenesis' sidelong face as she narrated her past, and she looked really mature.

Surely it was because the will sharpened by the need of survival showed up on the face, exactly the same emotion she showed when she prepared for the trip in Gulbetty.

"They said that if I managed to finish this long trip safely, I should help them when they're in trouble?"

Kusla stared intently at the sidelong face of Fenesis, and said,

"And what else?"

It seemed the ears under Fenesis' head twitched.

It was probably an illusion, as she lowered her head while grimacing.

"You really can see through everything."

"You're bad at hiding stuff."

Fenesis looked afar at the mountains dyed in the blue sky, saying,

"I said I will do my best."

It would probably be difficult for one to empathize unless both parties had the same predicament.

As expected, Fenesis did not tag along with them just to obtain news.

The sturdy bodies of the wanderers, their jovial manner of speech.

How much hardship did they suffer through to reach this stage? As someone of a different background, Kusla could not imagine.

However, it appeared their words touched Fenesis' heart.

For the latter looked so far away from him.

"Hey."

Kusla recovered, and called out,

"...?"

In the frosty mountains, the cold winds blew, and the Fenesis' bangs fluttered along with it.

Her eyes were as pretty as emeralds.

In the end, Kusla never said anything.

It feels like you will head off with them, he could not bring himself to say this.

"Don't drink too much when fooling around with them."

Kusla teased her deliberately.

"You will get drunk."

Fenesis stared back at Kusla, and finally, after a long while, gave a smile, as though she was tickled into it.

"So, the best course of action now is to retreat two days later?"

On the afternoon once the wanderers went out hunting, one of the scouts remaining at the fort said this.

"We don't have any clues. If we continue to suspect these innocent people, it'll tarnish's the Earl's reputation."

"And if we drag on too long, it'll be troublesome if we can't regroup with the main forces."

Hearing Kusla's words, the scout chuckled,

"We're always fighting against the uneasiness of being unable to regroup with them. It'll be bad if we aren't thorough with the investigations and return, but the consequences will be dire if we investigate too much and get abandoned."

"If only the Goddess of luck is willing to stay with us for a longer time."

"Goodness, if the world is just filled with salvagable matters, living will be a happy thing."

The duo joked, and the scout chuckled with some resignation,

"Looks like a miss."

"It's common."

Kusla shrugged.

However, he in turn showed a look of relief.

He had a feeling that if they continued remaining there, Fenesis would get closer with the wanderers, and she might actually move away with them.

He knew that because of the incident involving Weyland, Fenesis was a little distant from him. This was one of the reasons why he sensed that she would stay away from him. If he simply told her the truth, given her personality, she probably would follow him easily.

However, the matter was not that simple.

In any case, Kusla's own thoughts would never be compatible, and he had no intention of compromising.

It was already sunset after Kusla finished discussing the matter with the scout and decided to take action. Once he saw the wanderers return, he inadvertently widened his eyes.

Fenesis was worn out, carried on someone else's back.

"She couldn't move at all, probably because she was so active over the past few days."

Caldoz carried Fenesis while the latter was draped on the sheepskin, saying this,

Such a fool, Kusla was a little taken aback, and yet relieved that she was neither hurt nor caught in an accident.

He received Fenesis from Caldoz, carried her into the hall, and had her sleep in the corner.

"It was our fault this unpleasant matter happened."

Caldoz stared at Fenesis's sleeping face worriedly, and Kusla could only grimace, answering,

"I was the one who sent her to probe on you."

"...Haha. I can tell whether she was being earnest here."

With a smile, Caldoz left the hall.

Kusla sighed, and at the same time, he looked down at Fenesis.

There was some sand on her face, probably from when she was carried back.

Kusla wiped the sand from her face with his fingers, and wondered, though he was trying to protect her, what he was basically doing was no different from the Choir.

Looking at his aim for Magdala, his actions were truly no different from the Choir. In the end, he was using Fenesis for his own purpose, and not hers.

It was also the case when Fenesis asked him about the wanderers. It was because Caldoz's group did not seem suspicious that the conversation went by successfully.

But if Kusla did identify something suspicious about Caldoz's group, what would happen next?

It would be likely that Fenesis would voice more opposition than she did with Weyland's.

And this time, she certainly would have given up on him.

Kusla too had no intention of compromising. He had no reason to.

However, Kusla did not end up doing what the Choir would do. Because of this, he wanted the matter of him saving Weyland remain a secret, even having Irine lie in his stead.

The problem that remained was that, if he wanted to follow his own rationale, he would only obtain the results Fenesis did not hope for.

Kusla groaned, and pondered a while. As he had assumed, it should be Fenesis who should change.

In any case, if she wanted to continue surviving with this way of life, her thought process was way too naive.

It was the case too when she was carried back. When they were working at the workshop, he reminded her time and time again to be mindful of her own body, yet she could not do so.

Once he thought to this point, Kusla concluded that he was actually frustrated about Fenesis' conflicted feelings, and that it was stupid.

What should have changed was Fenesis' thought process.

If she did not, Kusla would have to change the most important thing in his life.

It would be akin to the Queen of Latria giving up on Pagan beliefs and converting to Orthodoxy.

But that should not be possible.

Not at all.

We have no more suspicions of you. Kusla told the wanderers the next day, during dinner.

After a moment of surprise, the men laughed heartily.

It was as though they were saying that though they were happy, they were more delighted than usual.

And they were about to leave the fort, and head towards a different hunting ground.

People had their own paths to take, and such paths might intertwine from time to time.

So, sometimes, when people were about to leave for journeys, a Father would say some blessings, that it is wonderful for another encounter.

That night, the festivities were loud enough for all the wine in the fort to be finished. Fenesis had already collapsed drunk, and midway through his drinks, Kusla got up to leave.

He sat by the side of Fenesis, who had collapsed by the wall, and stared at her in front of the furnace. He then noticed a few things. The scouts knew very well that they would be exposed once they got drunk, and it concerned their lives, so they skilfully evaded the wanderers' coercion to get them to drink. The wanderers pretentiously brought the wine to their lips, but they drank little of it, and half the time, they were likely pretending to drink.

Despite this, Kusla had a feeling that their joy was not an act. It was definitely a state of sheep and wolves being unable to be together.

Once he noticed this, Kusla could not help but give a forlorn smile.

They were still merrymaking, and it appeared that if he slept at this point, he would probably be awakened by their rowdiness.

It had been a while since he experienced such a lively scene, and thus, he was touched, and wanted to remain in this rowdy atmosphere.

But he could not continue drinking, and thus, got bored.

He scanned his surroundings, and spotted a book revealed from Fenesis' belongings.

She had been enthusiastically reading the book about the Golden Sheep, as though telling Kusla that she could be of help. This book seemed to concern all kinds of fables, and the book she had during that incident in Gulbetty was probably similar.

Kusla opened the book he typically would not read.

During his days as an apprentice, Kusla would enthusiastically read such books, but once he learned that there was a difference between alchemists and the so-called magic, he lost interest for such books that had no realism to them. At this point, he only had nostalgia for the contents of the book. Also, he had the notion that Fenesis was naive for thinking that she could be of help by reading such a book.

With a wry smile, Kusla flipped through the pages, and suddenly noticed a strap of cloth tucked in the book.

"Hm?"

It appeared this cloth was placed right in the middle of the book.

Where the fable of the Golden Sheep was at.

However, there was a line of words there. Once he saw those words recorded on the strap of cloth, Kusla gasped, and looked towards his side.

Fenesis was lying by the side, her waist arched as she slept. Some slight snoring could be heard, and her slender body heaved and shrank in a rhythmic manner. Kusla did his best to close the book as quietly as possible, and slipped it back to the original position Fenesis left it at.

Then, he lowered his head, looking at her petite sleeping body.

Stunned, he watched her sleep, and the thoughts racing in his mind moved him.

Fenesis knew the secret of the wanderers, and probably for a long while. Probably when they were in Gulbetty.

However, despite knowing this in Gulbetty, she never notified Kusla, and that was still forgivable. She had thoroughly thought through the matter, that if she were to say something baseless, she would merely be teased by Kusla for being a fool, and thus, she did not.

But if Fenesis had known about the secret of the wanderers, the significance of her being carried back by the wanderers would have been different, and that was what Kusla was shocked about. On that day, Fenesis probably did it on purpose.

Then, her not revealing this secret till this point clearly indicated another undeniable fact.

Kusla stared at Fenesis' sleeping face.

The worry in Kusla's heart was reignited again.

Was Fenesis going to go off with the wanderers just like this.

How stupid He thought. If they were to be pursued, they would be found immediately. However, Fenesis's foolishness was already evident in Gulbetty. She had no form of wisdom that put her over anyone else.

And even if she did not do such a foolish thing, one easily figure out something elementary.

And that was, that she did not hope for the wanderers' secret to be revealed.

Fenesis definitely asked Kusla that question on that evening, having known what happened. If she were to reveal the secret of the wanderers, what would happen to them, and how they would be treated because of her spilling the beans. Her tribe was once splintered to nothing, and this time, she might end up ruining the wanderers.

It was impossible for Fenesis to not ask.

And so, if Kusla were to head back with the scouts to the forces, and report the secret of the wanderers to the superiors, what would happen next?

Kusla had to admit this.

Fenesis would surely never forgive him.

This was no longer a prank on her. If he actually revealed the secret, it would be barging into the place Fenesis treasured most, and wrecking everything within.

Kusla heard the laughter that gradually got calmer from the wine festival before the furnace, and looked over at Fenesis, who was gently rolled up beside him. He felt that he was at a crossroad.

With this step, he might be able to turn lead into gold, or gold into lead.

If he reported the wanderers' secrets to the Knights, his position in Kazan would be solidified. There probably would never be a second chance. He personally did not feel that a new haven like Kazan would happen again. Even if it were to occur again, the chances of Kusla being able to participate again would be almost 0.

But if he was to choose profit, he would surely lose Fenesis.

At the same time, he wondered, establishing an unshakable position in Kazan would be something irreplaceable. But what about Fenesis?

Such merciless weighing of gains and losses arose in Kusla's mind, and as it did, a gust blew up, ruffling his heart. He was an Alchemist; named 'Interest', or 'Kusla'.

What would be the correct choice? Which path would lead him to Magdala?

The scene of pouring the mercury into the chicken's stomach and reanimating the corpse reappeared in Kusla's mind.

Was he not someone inhuman who would toy with lives?

Even after seeing his lover being dissected before him, he was able to drink wine leisurely. What was he thinking back then? On smelting.

Kusla gulped.

However, what caused him to realize that was not the case, was none other than Fenesis.

Right, thinking back about it, Fenesis never changed at all.

She was commanded by the Choir to enter the workshop Kusla and Weyland were at, with the risk that she might be killed, but felt pity for Kusla, who was supposed to be framed.

However, her words saved Kusla from his grey memories. It was thanks to her foolishness that he realized he was able to love someone properly.

In spite of this, two kings could not occupy the same throne.

Fenesis was sleeping before Kusla in a defenceless manner.

I'm supposed to be 'Interest'. Choose the right course of action/ Kusla told himself.

The thick darkness of the winter night engulfed the fort in the mountains. Perhaps that was a certain thing in Kusla's heart.

At this moment, Fenesis rolled around, and Kusla's belongings toppled over.

It seemed the drunk Fenesis had no intention of waking up, and Kusla looked over at the belongings that fell out.

It was the emerald he had the jewel craftsman refine.

When Fenesis first saw this, she was shocked, thinking Kusla intended to have this as a gift for a woman in town like what Weyland would do. However, back then, Kusla did not express his own intentions.

Once he heard of the harshness of the journey from Fenesis, he deliberately made such preparations just in case, that if they were to split up, Fenesis would not be in trouble.

But due to the incident involving Weyland, he lost the opportunity to give this to her.

The silver pendant, the thin chain, undoubtedly, this was an ornament for a woman. When splitting from the main forces, Kusla was worried that this pricey item would be stolen, and as it was so small, he brought it along with him.

If Fenesis was a complete fool, it was likely that if he gave this emerald that could fetch money to build a house to her, he would be forgiven.

However, Fenesis was not that kind of person. Kusla was so shocked that he was so clear on this.

If he did something unforgivable, even if he swapped out a room's worth of gold, she would never forgive him. If he could be forgiven, he would be forgiven if he made a little apology.

She was not a bad lady, definitely not a bad lady.

At this point, Kusla was at the stage where he had a sampling of research materials, and had to do a smelting he could not fail. The differing methods would result in different items obtained.

It felt as though that thing was lead that looked like gold, and yet looked like gold that looked like lead.

What exactly was his aim?

He held onto the emerald firmly, asking himself in this darkness.

After putting some labels onto the belongings, they were done preparing to leave. After that, they simply needed to spend several days before meeting up with the Vanguard.

“Sir, we’re done with the preparations.”

Caldoz said as he came over to look at the carriage.

He was holding some little gourds in hand.

“I suppose your carriage still has some space, so I brought this along.”

It appeared to be a parting gift.

“That terrible wine?”

Kusla asked. Caldoz gave a vague looking smile.

“It appears that you unexpectedly got addicted to it.”

That taste was truly intriguing, one that Kusla could not recreate again.

Once Kusla and the scouts comparted the luggages, they wrapped the gourds in towels to avoid them from breaking, and put them into the carriage.

"But is it fine to not have an additional day of rest?"

Kusla did not respond.

Last night, they did not sleep much, and were still a little dazed from the wine.

Fenesis too was not fully awake from the wine. At this point, she remained sleeping in the room.

"Wake up, and drink this gift again?"

Kusla laughed in a self-deprecating manner, and Caldoz too guffawed.

"Hahaha. That isn't a bade idea."

"But we certainly don't get along with each other. Even if we do get closer, this is the furthest we go."

Hearing this, Caldoz showed a sarcastic smile.

"Now then, since we're done with the preparations, time to bring her along."

Kusla said, and looked over at the atrium.

He walked down the corridor, and had already made up his mind. He could not contort his beliefs. That was all; other than that, he thought anything else was fine.

The hall felt strangely empty without the belongings. Kusla woke up Fenesis, who was sleeping there, and gently slipped the emerald ornament into the hands of her sleepy self.

"Eh? Hm?"

While she looked skeptical, Kusla said,

"Back at the market, I learned how harsh a journey can be from you. Use this as protection, just in case."

"..."

Fenesis stared at Kusla in surprise, and looked at the emerald in her hands.

"You aren't suited to dress up as a town girl, but things like gemstones should suit you fine."

Kusla patted her slender shoulders without waiting for her response, and said, "Get ready."

"Erm."

Fenesis called out, and Kusla, having stood up, turned his head back.

"What is it?"

"..."

She lowered her head, seemingly furious, and after some hesitation, she said,

"...Why give this to me now?"

I still cannot agree to what you did in Gulbetty, and I do not want this now.

To summarize, this was probably what she meant.

After some pondering, Kusla said,

"I will only abide by my way of life. This is something prepared for you, and nothing else. I feel this can be handed over to you at such a time."

"Hm?"

Fenesis lifted her head, seemingly realizing something.

"If you don't like it, don't throw it away. If you don't like it."

Kusla said,

"Sell it, and use it as fuel for your survival."

Fenesis widened her eyes, but Kusla did not remain there.

He walked out of the hall, and down the corridor.

He felt some uproad within, fury boiling over.

"Damn it."

He cursed out, and returned to the carriage.

He could only do this.

If he changed his way of life, the direction he would take would change.

Those that thought smooth-sailing events were a good thing were lucky ones who never thought of falling into Hell when they failed.

Craftsmen would put the items that concerned their livelihoods near them, for they knew it would be the rope of life that they could entrust their lives to. For Alchemists, the only rope of life they could rely on was their way of life.

In that sense, the wanderers were the same. They lived on the fable of the Golden Sheep, and because of this, they were able to advance; because of this, they were able to thoroughly hide their true identities.

The final conclusion was that they were prospectors seeking gold ores.

The method was to disguise them using sheepskin.

There were many ways to extract gold, especially gold sand. Simple they might be strange tools would be required. One could easily filter gold dust

from the other minerals through different densities, so special boards or plates would be needed.

They used an extremely inefficient tool that was used in ancient times, a tool long forgotten.

Sheepskin.

They did not dry sheepskin just to wash them. By sinking the sheepskin into the river, they let the grains enter the wool, and sought for any golddust that sank deep into the wool. For this purpose, they had to wander around various houses with furnaces.

That was why their archery skills were atrocious. In the end, hunting was simply about giving them an excuse to put on sheepskin.

The fable of the Golden Sheep was thoroughly linked to this matter of the ancients scooping golddust using sheepskin. Fenesis found this message through the book containing those fables.

Fenesis probably let Caldoz carry her back to affirm that they were gold prospectors. It would be obviously strange if she were to bring her face to the sheepskin and check the grains stuck to the wool. However, she could do it when she was carried back. Thus, she thought hard, and came to this method.

She kept this matter hidden from Kusla.

As for the reason, it was not because they were innocent.

But that as they were prospectors, Fenesis kept it from him.

They were hired to seek out gold. For the Knights, they were trouble that could start a new war.

In that case, Kusla was left with little choice. It was not something he could be happy about, but by abiding by his beliefs, he could rationalize everything. Just as craftsmen would put the tools they lived by beside them, Kusla could only confide in his way of life.

Like how the wanderers put on the sheepskin to go out hunting.

“Let’s go then.”

The scout holding the reins saw Fenesis walk over, slowly got back to a corner of the carriage, and said this.

Fenesis did not look at Kusla.

But at the emerald she received from him.

Kusla merely sat on the moving carriage, staring at the crude carriage the wanderers used with the excessive amount of nails hammered into it.

Epilogue

“And so?”

Weyland asked.

“So what? That’s it.”

Kusla answered, and sliced the dried meat on the table.

They met up with the vanguard team in an important trading town in the mountains.

“Stop lying~”

Weyland giggled as he leaned forward.

“In that case, why didn’t you claim your reward, Kusla~?”

Kusla shoved Weyland’s gleeful face back, and ate the dried meat.

“It’s really unbelievable that you would actually go against your beliefs, Kuslla~”

“I didn’t. Didn’t you hear me?”

Weyland then immediately answered,

“In that case, why didn’t you celebrate with the higher ups~?”

Kusla turned his face back, and Weyland had no intention of letting him go just like that.

With a displeased look, he said,

“...I obtained my reward in another manner.”

“Another manner?”

"Yes, and so...I didn't twist my beliefs."

Kusla too knew that he was just making an excuse.

However, the reason why he was so agitated as he chewed on the meat jerky was not because of this, and also not because Weyland was pestering him.

There was something that infuriated him more, not because of this, and not because of Weyland pestering him.

There was something, more than anything else, that angered him.

"Hm? Looks like the Alchemist Kusla had a slip in the mind?"

Kusla threw the remaining bit of dried meat to the mocking Weyland, but the latter dodged it easily.

He closed his eyes, and groaned.

No matter how many times he thought about it, he was incensed.

It happened when Kusla met up with the vanguard and reported on the wanderers to Alzen. Kusla was alone in an inn room, his legs on the table as he drank wine, while Fenesis walked in.

"...Erm."

She spoke up tentatively, and there was a gourd of wine in her hands.

Weyland did not learn his lesson even after what happened in Gulbetty, and was wooing girls again. Irine was out doing what Kusla tasked her to do.

"Why didn't you mention it?"

It seemed Fenesis realized that Kusla knew about the wanderer's secret. There was no need to ask her she knew. He did not pay attention, but thinking back, Fenesis would have been careful about a book with such contains. Thus, she probably left some of her hair in the book. If someone were to flip the book, she would know immediately.

And then, she saw Kusla discover the content of that book, but the latter did not report to the Herald.

Thus, she could only thank him.

Fenesis's thoughts were so naive, too naive.

"Mention? What is it?"

Thus, Kusla showed an impatient attitude.

Fenesis said tentatively,

"Erm...about the golden..."

Kusla sighed, and put removed his legs from the table.

And with his eyes half opened, he stared at Fenesis.

"What's with this wine? You intend to thank me?"

"...!"

"You don't have a reason to do that. I just followed my beliefs and seized the benefit, that's all."

"Eh?"

The gourd of wine nearly fell out from Fenesis' hands.

"The secret those people have can be turned into profit either way. Of course I'll use it for my own benefit."

Fenesis gave a stoic look, her spirit practically gone from her as she stared at Kusla.

"It's a fact that I didn't reveal that secret to the Herald. However, I never once twisted my own way of life."

The expression vanished from Fenesis' face.

Kusla had no idea what she was thinking, but it was easy to imagine. If Kusla manipulated that information, the simple, happy journey the wanderers had would be turned upside down.

"But those people will probably continue wandering around. That's the end of the story. Take this wine, and get out of the room."

Once Kusla said that, tears fell from Fenesis's eyes.

"Why...are you..."

"Why are you crying? Didn't you hear me?"

Frustrated by Fenesis, Kusla said those words.

And she shook her head, saying,

"I heard about it. So..."

And Fenesis continued,

"Why...must you be so stubborn?"

"Hm?"

Fenesis lifted her head.

Seeing such an expression, Kusla recalled Irine's words.

Fenesis looked sad. She was hurt.

"You exchanged for that gold, didn't you?"

For a moment, Kusla was speechless.

"I heard from Miss Irine."

"...I see."

Kusla answered.

Irine was out at this point. As a reward for keeping the secret, Kusla looted a pile of gold from Caldoz and the others, and so Irine was bringing this gold to exchange for jewellery that could be easily carried along.

This gold was a proof of act he did without twisting his beliefs, and not losing Fenesis.

Kusla could that from their belongings that there was no gold. However, he kept an eye on the crude cart they had. If they were prospectors looking for gold mines, they would surely hide the gold near them. With that mindset, it was obvious that the cart looked unnatural. Looting valuables was a specialty of an alchemist. Kusla could easily imagine how they hid the gold.

They had gold nails on the cart, rather than just metal, and had a coating of metal above to hide it.

Kusla did not confiscate their gold, but instead weighed the benefits of reporting to the Herald as compared to blackmailing the wanderers into giving up an acceptable amount of gold.

And Kusla got them on the throats. In future, he could be able to use it.

However, he did not report to the Herald this time, which Fenesis hoped for. She might end up having a beautified image of Kusla, and have unnecessary expectations of him.

Thus, Kusla wanted to have her understand that he was a heartless, cold-blooded alchemist, and added on.

"I rather blackmail them and loot them for money than to set them up and please the Herald. What I did has always been to benefit myself. So, I don't know what you're mistaken about, but you don't have to thank me."

Fenesis held onto the wine, seemingly looking for support, and the contorted look on her face was seemingly on the verge of tears.

She probably was worried about Caldoz and the others, and also, feeling heartbroken about how unscrupulous Kusla was.

But it was fine.

It was fine as long as Fenesis' hopes about him were not beyond his wildest imaginations.

Thinking this, Kusla waved her off like a dog, wanting Fenesis to get out.

However,

"...You."

"Huh?"

"You're really that kind of person."

For a moment, Kusla could not understand what she meant, but he felt that she should be able to understand what he was getting at, and was about to answer, that's right.

But before he could say anything, Fenesis spoke up first,

"I know, actually."

Fenesis pulled her head in.

"The one who saved Mr Weyland was you."

And in the brief pause, before Kusla could say a second word,

Fenesis lifted her eyes with a pouting look, saying,

"You are...despicable."

Fenesis wiped her tears. Kusla was speechless.

She knew about Weyland?

For a moment, Kusla was unable to breathe.

"So, I was not sure if you would let go of Mr Caldoz and the others. Thus, I spoke with Miss Irine, to think of a plan."

Irine? Discuss?

"So, Miss Irine said that you are not a bad person, that even after knowing the secret Mr Caldoz and the others have, you will consider my feelings."

The tear-stained emerald eyes were staring right at Kusla.

She then averted her eyes, probably hesitant on what she should say next."

"I-if I were to put myself as hostage, you would let them go..."

Saying that, Fenesis lowered her head, blushing slightly. Kusla did not want to realize that.

Perhaps he had no confidence that he could maintain his poise.

"So, you..."

Fenesis lowered her head, and took a deep sigh,

"Let them go."

She then lifted her head, showed a troubled smile, and said,

“You are really despicable after all.”

At that moment, Kusla realized that he fell into a trap.

Irine betrayed him. Though she appeared to be working with Irine, she definitely revealed the truth to Kusla. Thus, it was to be expected that Fenesis had some expectations about the Cladoz situation, and this was the exact same situation Kusla wanted to avoid.

But after planning with Irine, Fenesis predicted that if she were to beg Kusla as usual, he would not let Caldoz and the others go.

Kusla did not want to report Caldoz to the Herald, and considering that if he did, he would have hurt Fenesis, the relationship between those two would be unsalvageable. Kusla took action with regards to Weyland, and if this fact was ever revealed to the public, Kusla felt that he would never forgive Caldoz and the others.

But as long as a fact remained unknown, a person's position would be changed drastically.

Just as lead can be turned into gold, so gold can be turned into lead.

Fenesis plated herself well, and used herself as a bargaining chip.

To put one over Kusla.

Refining her plots.

Just like an alchemist!

“You're saying that!?”

Kusla stood up and growled furiously.

"You bluffed me?"

Fenesis shrank her neck and body back, and exerted more strength on the gourd of wine she was holding onto.

However, she did not remain silent.

"...You told me to do whatever I want."

"Ugh."

Kusla was speechless.

And so, he was so infuriated that he nearly fainted, and sat back on the chair again.

Was it Fenesis' fault? For fooling him? No, himself? For demanding that from her?

Stunned, he stared at her. He finally realized how foolish he was.

She knew everything, and continued maintaining an aloof attitude, managing to deftly hook Kusla.

Thus, it would not be surprising if her actions during their time with Caldoz and the others were all just an act.

In any case, Fenesis only did that after ample confidence. She felt that Kusla would consider her feelings carefully before doing what she did.

Shall he find a hole to bury himself in?

He really was a hopeless fool after all.

"...Erm."

Kusla felt the pain brought by his folly, and Fenesis said to him tentatively,

“.....What?”

After a long moment of silence, Kusla lifted his head, and saw Fenesis beaming at him. This was preposterous.

“I do resemble...an alchemist now, no?”

“...”

Kusla closed his eyes.

The one who told her to do as she pleased was him.

But despite knowing that Fenesis became cavalier in her attitude, he never expected himself to be caught in a trap she set up.

Like a little girl who successfully completed a dispatch mission, Fenesis looked up at Kusla with a hopeful expression.

Those eyes contained not only delight and relief.

But also confidence.

And also, a pride devoid of arrogance.

“...Don’t you mention this to Weyland.”

With a forced tone, Kusla said. That was all he could only say.

Fenesis pulled her neck in, looking gleeful.

That face seemed to be saying that her thoughts of Kusla not being a bad person was correct.

And then, she said,

“I am your comrade after all.”

Kusla stood up, looked down at Fenesis, and smacked her on the head. If he did not do so, he would not have stopped himself from embracing Fenesis. The latter was inadvertently startled by this action, and Kusla snatched the gourd of wine from her, uncapped it, and brought it to his lips.

Soon after, Irine returned, and Kusla saw the gleeful sneer on her face.

She probably overheard everything outside.

Kusla shoved aside the two ladies who were exchanging looks, and went off to a bar in the town.

And so, he met up with Weyland.

That was simply what happened.

"I told you not to show me such a face. Do you want burnt rice for food?"

Kusla let loose such vile words that were used when blacksmiths or alchemists squabbled.

But Weyland ignored Kusla's words as he cackled and drank away. Kusla too had no intention of beating him up, for it was obvious who was being the fool?

Weyland seemed to have noticed almost everything that happened, and he waved at the bar entrance. Without turning back, Kusla too knew who arrived.

Comrades?

Kusla snorted at Fenesis while the latter approached him with a smile, and poured some more wine into his mug.

If others were to worry for his sake, he would be a fool.

And Fenesis brazenly sat beside Kusla, the emerald necklace on her.

“Erm...this is for me, right?”

Kusla did not answer. He could not say anything.



If it was like before, when Kusla ignored her, surely she would be hurt, and scowl.

However, she looked really happy.

Kusla knew that it was impudent of him, but he stood up, ostensibly trying to escape.

And Fenesis actually pursued after him.

She even asked that. At that moment, Kusla felt an arduous pain in his head.

Kusla stood at the door of the bar, and turned around.

Weyland and Irine were grinning away at the table.

"...I guess I was the one who said not to express my true thoughts easily, right?"

Fenesis beamed happily.

"Yes."

She was probably satisfied, or probably afraid of the revenge that would come if she continued to press the issue, for she was about to return to the table.

If this embarrassment continued, Kusla probably would not be able to forgive himself either.

"Not bad."

Fenesis shrank back in shock, and looked back at Kusla.

She continued to smiling with a teary look, and scampered back to the table.

Kusla could only sigh as he watched her, and returned to the table. What he was peeved at was that, though he was duped, he could not feel peeved for some reason.

Fenesis' growth was something worth being delighted over.

In their road to Kazan, there probably would be new issues. However, they probably would be able to continue on happily. Kusla could not help but think of such things unbefitting of him.

And as he stared at her, he felt that, though he was not Irine,

Perhaps he should try believing in luck.

That perhaps, in this unsightly world, it would not be a bad option to desire something one could associate with the day of Spring, a sweet little daily life.

However, the sudden galloping of a horse caused Kusla to stop in his tracks.

“Urgent! Urgent!”

A horse suddenly arrived abrupting before the bar, raising its fore legs.

Riding on it was a man dressed as a mercenary, and he hopped off without any regard, running into the bar, yelling,

“The Queen of Latria has converted to Orthodoxy!”

Kusla widened his eyes at the man.

“Our destination has been converted to a land of believers. So, so—”

The man wheezed as he said that, and all the people in the bar looked at him.

"We have no justification to occupy Kazan now."

The bar went silent.

Someone asked,

"Then...where are we going to?"

Kusla and the others could go on because Kazan was a pagan town.

But what if it was no longer a pagan town?

"...There's one thing we can be certain of."

Another person said.

"We have no place to return to."

The winds are unpredictable.

Kusla sat by the chair, feeling abnormally calm as he harbored such a thought.

And he held Fenesis' trembling hand, making sure she was beside him.

Afterword

It has been a while, everyone. This is Isuna Hasekura. After half a year, a new volume is published again.

It did not seem that long back when the framework for this new series was established, but it is now the 3rd volume. Time certainly flew by quickly.

I hope for the next volume to be completed quickly, so that in the next afterward, I will be shocked to realize, it's the 4th volume already?

After rereading this 3rd volume, I felt that it was Weyland's turn this time. He had few appearances, but his position seemed interesting. The relationship between Fenesis and Kusla developed, and as an author, I am looking forward to it to. I will be spoiling the story if I write too much here, so I shall stop.

Personal life-wise, I have obtained a hunting license. That hunting was due to being influenced by a certain manga.

But obtaining a gun license was really troublesome, so I shall leave it. It seems that I will not accomplish anything if this keeps up. Shall I put some hunting traps...

This Summer, I might go kayaking to. This one does not require a permit, so I guess I should be able to do it immediately. However, thinking about how I need a driver's license, I just feel the road in front of me is foggy.

February, I went to Taiwan, and my old habit of wanting to learn a foreign language happened again. This little habit occurs regularly, and it was cheaper to go to Taiwan than to Okinawa, and I spent the same amount of

time playing. The internet facilities were really sufficient, the environment wonderful that I could think, if only I can stay overseas to learn a foreign language and work at the same time...

To note, I have learned how to use Skype for discussing work. Now I can leave Japan at any time!

Thinking about all these, the days passed by.

After rambling so much, I have finally finished my manuscript.

Now then, let us meet again in the next volume. Until next time.

Isuna Hasekura.